FATHER MEANS WELL

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(*with Booth Tarkington and Kenneth Roberts*)

Father Means Well

by

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To

LOUISE

FATHER MEANS WELL

CHAPTER ONE

THE four young men who stood erectly at attention before Belden Plimsoll's desk were notably good-looking. They were so good-looking that there was between them a suggestion of kinship—they might have been cousins or even brothers—tall, straight-backed, lean of hip and wide of shoulder, clear-eyed, square-chinned young men, and upon them all, like an astral uniform, there dwelt a look of sober-minded, earnest purpose that heightened their resemblance to each other and to Belden Plimsoll himself.

They gave him, in fact, a pleasant feeling of vicarious fatherhood. They might have been his own sons, he thought, blood of his blood. In each of them he saw, as he would have seen it in a son of his body, a definite mirroring of Belden Plimsoll at twenty-three or four.

Reading from left to right they were Averey, Saltonstall, Westgate and Jarrett. Plimsoll took pride and pleasure in the surnames and gave himself, precisely as he would have given it to another, due credit for their excellence.

He smiled upon the young men, a smile at once personal and presidential.

"Beginning to feel at home?"

Four heads nodded, four mouths grinned temperately and with respect. Only one spoke, and Plimsoll made a mental note to keep a sharper eye on Jarrett because of that superfluous "Yes, sir." He'd never felt quite as sure about Jarrett as about the others.

"Think you're going to like Lakeport well enough to stay here?"

He gave the question almost a jocular inflection, and all four young men, grinning and nodding once more, made it evident that to them as to Plimsoll it was comic to imply that anyone could possibly find Lakeport less than perfect. Again, however, a black mark went down in Plimsoll's mind against young Jarrett for a needless "Yes, indeed, sir!"

Lippy, Jarrett. Maybe—

"Well, you may change your minds about that after tomorrow," he said, more humorously than before. "I want you all to come out to East Hill for dinner. Seven-thirty. Dinner-clothes—it'll be just a family party—you four and Mrs. Plimsoll and my little girl."

All four spoke, this time, but Jarrett did himself no service by his unnecessary "Delighted!"

Plimsoll's nod dismissed them kindly and they filed out. He smiled at the soundlessly closing door and his face, as he turned his glance upon the gold-framed photographs that stood before him on the wide, gleaming void of desk, relaxed and warmed and softened, without, however, forfeiting its look of power and authority.

It was his habit, as the four-thirty whistle sounded each afternoon the knell of the parting business day, to close his mind, as he closed his office, against affairs of state, to become the private citizen, the husband and—with emphasis—the father, but this process did not surrender any of his importance.

Indeed this importance was no mere robe of office to be laid aside at will, even at the wrought-iron will that ruled the Intercontinental Adding Machine Company. It went with Belden Plimsoll into private life. As he resigned the greater overlordship and assumed

the less there settled upon him, unmistakably, the aspect of power and purpose more assured and resolute than ever.

His face, now turned toward the framed photographs, was benevolent and kindly, but the face, nevertheless, of one predestined, competent and resolved to rule. Upon it dwelt the look that prints itself in time upon the faces of all high in government among their fellows—the look of judges and editors and generals, of all men who know that their word is, and of right ought to be, above appeal or challenge.

It was precisely here that Belden Plimsoll's greatness proved to its possessor that it was extraordinary. Before the photographs of wife and daughter, he knew, the usual captain of industry was wont to forfeit his commission and to be reduced ingloriously to the ranks; in domestic life he knew that kings became, only too often, meek, timid subjects; he knew that even the uplifted hand of the traffic policeman might degenerate, at home, into a feeble gesture, futile and absurd. Just here, where so many men failed miserably who succeeded in all else, Belden V. Plimsoll most conspicuously had not failed.

The portraits on his desk, singularly alike in meekness of expression, were pleasingly dissimilar in all else. Albertine, except for the biological detail of birth, had contributed nothing to the creation of Belden Plimsoll's daughter.

Lollie was pure Belden, inheriting straight from her paternal grandmother not only her vivid, shining darkness of hair and brow and eye, her firm mouth and definite chin, the confident carriage of head and shoulder, but those qualities, also, of mind and spirit which these outward traits implied.

Plimsoll, contemplating the picture, was pleased

with himself for having had a daughter instead of a son. He had, in this as in most other decisions, chosen wisely. A boy might have "taken after" Albertine.

Lollie, smiling faintly at him from her frame, seemed to felicitate him upon his choice. The look was convincing, so convincing that it dissipated the thin, misty shadow that had lately overclouded Plimsoll's mind.

It had been—as nearly as Belden Plimsoll could come to folly—foolish to feel the slightest doubt of Lollie. The picture proved it, but it was proven still more convincingly by reasoned logic.

Other men might take it for granted that children were creatures of blind accident, that you accepted, helplessly, whatever you happened to draw out of a game of parental grabbag.

Other men, but not, thank God, Belden V. Plimsoll!

He had the same right to be proud of Lollie as to be proud of the New Model Q All Electric Intercontinental. She was as truly his creation, the perfect finished product that was ready for the world.

Ready for the world! Plimsoll drew in his breath slowly. Lollie was nineteen. Lollie was finished. Finished, however, only as a Model Q All Electric might be said to be finished when it stood ready for the packers in the shipping room—in a daughter as in an adding machine completeness was not an end but only a beginning.

Again, as he contemplated the future beyond this beginning of Lollie's, Plimsoll's sense of justice compelled him to thank his God that he was not, in this respect, as other men.

They brought up their daughters, these others, without forethought or art, and when they were grown, left them to be the playthings of blind circumstance.

They sent them off to college or globe-trotting at careless random among wasters, drones and parasites, and blamed their luck when it brought them, as their sons-in-law, drones, wasters, poets or dukes or polo players!

Not Belden Plimsoll! The good old days were gone, to be sure—the times when a wise, loving father chose his daughter's husband for her and—and made it stick. You couldn't order your girl to marry the man you chose. But you could see to it that she chose, herself, from men who measured up, in person, character, ability and wit, in family, in culture, even in surname, to the privilege and honor of becoming sons-in-law to even Belden Plimsoll.

Nor was this difficult, if you happened to be president of a corporation that employed some thousands of high-grade, high-paid young Americans, a corporation that needed, in any case, to recruit to that force, each year, a few score of able, fearless, earnest youngsters.

There was nothing bizarre about sifting and winnowing from the senior classes of a dozen great colleges the right kind of raw material out of which the right kind of department heads and managers could presently be moulded.

But Belden Plimsoll had chosen his new blood not merely with an eye to business. He had looked ahead. For three years he had been importing every spring a few such youngsters as the four who had just left his presence. He had, moreover, given employment to the best of Lakeport's native crop of marriageable youth; he had singled out, here and there, a boy of Lollie's age or near it, who might conceivably invite her interest without deserving it, and with a goodly salary for bait, had sent him off to some safely distant job in Australia or Japan.

He had left little to chance. He did not allow surface virtues to content him. Even the handful of re-sifted, hand-picked youths who survived their post-graduate year of probation in the branch offices and were brought, like Averey, Saltonstall, Westgate and Jarrett, into Lakeport's upper social stratum, lived here under a system of friendly espionage that took close note of their evenings and their weekends, and now and then, because of this, one of the number was suddenly promoted to a post in Javan or Godire.

Belden Plimsoll's daughter would fall in love, one of these days, as if, like other girls, by accident, but in all human probability she would fall in love with a good-looking, healthy, level-headed, purposeful young man already successfully engaged in making the world adding-machine-conscious.

And there would be nothing accidental about it.

Contentedly Plimsoll swiveled his chair so that he looked out upon the pleasant square of barbered turf and flower beds, about which, like a regiment at attention, were ranked the glass-walled saw-roofed buildings of the vast Intercontinental plant. Upon this scene he usually bent the look with which he contemplated Lollie's picture—the look of one who views his handiwork and finds it wholly good, but now, as it descended to the motor car that stood before the office entrance, this look dissolved and fled. Dismay and chagrin replaced it. Plimsoll's hand snaked to a button inset in the desk. As if the closed electric circuit itself propelled him, his secretary, a man intensely soundless, appeared in the doorway.

"Don't let anybody get in here, Gifford!"

Invisible rubber-tired machinery removed Gifford. Plimsoll glowered darkly down at the driveway.

The motor car itself might have justified that scowl,

for it had far outlived the day of its efficiency and had become, to such an eye as Plimsoll's, that most hateful of anachronisms, a machine that impiously wasted the time and energy its sacred mission, as a machine, required it to husband and defend. Plimsoll would have scowled upon it even if he had not known it, at first glance, for the property of Mrs. Pansy Dolliver, even if it had not been occupied by Pansy's only son.

Mr. Gilbert Dolliver, unaware of Plimsoll's lowering gaze, reposed at ease behind the steering wheel. He had permitted his body to slide down and forward until the weight of his unhatted head lay in comfort on the back of his seat. In this posture, with a notable economy of effort, he withdrew from a pocket a cigarette that manifestly had been carried there without the protection of case or packet. Igniting this by means of a small lighter, Mr. Dolliver contrived to endow the gesture with a large graciousness, as if, indulging a purely private desire to smoke, he was generously willing to perform the feat in public, where fortunate bystanders might enjoy the spectacle.

Plimsoll's frown smoothed. The sight of Gilbert Dolliver, living and perfect proof of what the wrong sort of bringing-up could produce, reminded him, by pleasant contrast, of Lollie, perfect consequence of perfect plan and perfect method. He had begun to smile, indeed, when the sound of a voice, soft and sweet and yet singularly pervasive, came to him from beyond the door. He sprang to his feet just as the door swung inward, and the voice came clearly past its edge.

"Oh, please don't apologize! Of course you couldn't possibly have known that Mr. Plimsoll always expects me to come right straight in. I'm not a bit angry with you—truly I'm not."

From the doorway, above the intervening crown of a wide, drooping hat, Gifford's eye begged mutely for pardon and Plimsoll, touched by its distress, nodded forgiveness.

"Why, Pansy!" He spoke as if with blending pleasure and regret. "I'm terribly sorry! I'm just leaving—I've a very important appointment."

Mrs. Dolliver, turning, regarded him with the smile of indulgent maturity, that smile which, overruling a child's artless belief that its affairs are urgent, still consents kindly to pretend that they are. She came in, Plimsoll yielding ground before her calmly confident advance.

"You know they'll have to wait for you," she said, "no matter how important they are. And I'll only keep you a minute or two."

Plimsoll loosened his collar. He couldn't misunderstand the meaning of Pansy's look and voice. They reminded him, of intention, that long ago a young ass masquerading somehow in Belden Plimsoll's body, had loudly promised to kill himself unless Miss Pansy Mole consented instantly to marry him. Even now he was able to find a thin excuse for that young idiot. Pansy must be almost fifty, but there still remained to her, unfaded, a good many of the young charms that had seemed, that still seemed, indeed, endearing.

"It's about my baby," said Pansy. "About Gilbert. I'm so worried about him."

Plimsoll's face tried to express, insincerely, reassurance, sympathy and disbelief. Gilbert was enough to worry even Pansy—a totally worthless reprobate, past twenty-one and still cadging cheerfully on an income hardly large enough for Pansy herself, a bone-lazy pup who'd never done an hour's work in his life, who, when Belden Plimsoll had demeaned himself to urge

it upon him, had declined with grinning obstinacy, a splendid job in the Buenos Aires office of the Intercontinental.

"He coughs," said Pansy. She illustrated, lifting a minute gloved palm primly to her mouth. Plimsoll recognized the imitation. It had irritated him all through that interview that Gilbert should preface and punctuate every speech with that brief, embarrassed cough.

"Cigarettes, probably."

"Oh, no! Gilbert hardly ever smokes. He wouldn't dream of doing it in my presence—he has the loveliest, old-fashioned manners!—and he's always with me. Sometimes I'm afraid I've let him get too much attached to me, Belden. He simply won't let me out of his sight. He doesn't want to go about with other boys and he never even looks at a girl." She smiled faintly, as one saying it who shouldn't. "I'm afraid he's just hopelessly in love with his silly old mama!"

"Well, he's got good reason," said Plimsoll, thinking of Gilbert's lily-of-the-field escape from labor and from strife. Pansy flushed and looked down, however, and Plimsoll saw that the remark was susceptible of gallant interpretation.

"But he *coughs* so!" she returned bravely to the topic. "He coughs every time he speaks."

"Probably nothing serious," said Plimsoll, welcoming this safer footing. "Let Dr. Perry take a look at——"

Pansy's patient, reproving gaze halted him. He remembered that several religions back Pansy had permanently severed diplomatic relations with the medical profession.

"I've done something better than that, I hope," said Pansy. "I've consulted our missionary."

"Missionary?"

"Yes. Our Swami. Lal Chundra Dass." She glowed softly. "Oh, Belden, if you only knew what it is to be set free from the Wheel of Things! If you only guessed what peace awaits you in the light of Buddha! If you'd let me bring the dear Swami to talk to you——"

"What did he have to say about Gilbert?"

Plimsoll preferred even Gilbert and his cough, as a topic, to a lecture on Buddhism.

"That's exactly why I came to you!" Pansy glowed more warmly. "Lal Dass says that Gilbert's cough is just the struggle of his Prisoned Soul to escape from the Wheel of Things. He says that Gilbert's Highest Self is marvelously loose, but it can't free itself from illusions in a place like Lakeport, where even the Swami finds it almost impossible to abstain from Effort."

"I'd say," said Plimsoll, "that Gilbert abstains pretty well, for a beginner."

"Oh, he does! He's splendid at it. But if he didn't have to stay here—if I could just take him on the pilgrimage——"

"Pilgrimage?" Plimsoll brightened. The word had a pleasantly spacious sound.

"Yes. The Swami's going to guide a few seekers to all the Holy Places. It's such a perfectly wonderful chance for Gilbert! He could even have a course in Meditation with the Swami's own uncle! And we can't go—just because that hateful Mr. McFetridge at the bank won't let us spend our own money! So of course I came to you. I always feel that I can come to you, Belden."

"Yes, yes. Of course." Plimsoll's mind moved fast. Sending Pansy and her cub of a boy on a pil-

grimage to India appealed to him as one of the worthiest possible uses of money, but he couldn't very well make a downright offer to finance the expedition. Pansy would inevitably regard it as her duty to tell everybody in Lakeport how beautifully generous he had been. She would tell it in such a way as to imply that a romantic, hopeless motive lay behind it. And Albertine, . . .

No. That wouldn't do. And it would be useless to talk to Arch McFetridge. Not even to be free for a few months of Pansy's soft obstinacy would McFetridge unbelt, one day before it was due, a thin dime of the trusteed income he administered.

"How about Herb Dolliver?" he suggested, hopefully. Gilbert's uncle had left Lakeport some years before, but he'd taken a comfortable bit of money along with him, and, after all, blood was thick. Pansy shook her head.

"He wouldn't do anything. He——" she paused—"he doesn't like Gilbert."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that!" Plimsoll had never cared much about Herb Dolliver but now, abruptly, he wondered whether he might not have done the man less than justice. If he didn't like his nephew, he had sound judgment; if he had made this clear to his sister-in-law he had courage and remarkable powers of self-expression.

"He doesn't," said Pansy. Her mouth tightened. "It wouldn't do any good to ask him. I thought perhaps you'd talk to Mr. McFetridge and try to make him understand how important it is for us to go."

"I could try," said Plimsoll. He rose. "I'll see him tomorrow at a Directors' Meeting. And now——"

Pansy, too, came to her feet.

"I think," she said slowly, "I think I'd better tell you. It will make you realize how absolutely important it is for us to go. But you must promise not to breathe it to anybody, Belden. Not to anybody."

"All right. I won't." Plimsoll managed a step toward the door.

"You know that we Seekers have been dreaming, hoping, for the Leader? You must have heard that we are looking for a new incarnation of the Buddha."

"Yes. It seems as if I'd heard something about it. Some lady's been educating him for the job somewhere. Saw a picture of him the other day. Krishna—something or other."

Pansy smiled compassionately.

"Oh, it's not *that* young man at all. Poor, dear Mrs. Simcoe's terribly mistaken. She's quite wrong. But *I* know. I've had the strangest kind of a Sending, Belden. I'm almost sure that it's——"

"Not—not——?" Plimsoll's head jerked toward the window.

"Yes." Pansy's whisper quivered. "Yes. It's Gilbert! But you won't breathe it yet, will you? No one else must know. It must be our wonderful secret, Belden—just yours and mine."

"All right." Plimsoll swallowed. Mrs. Dolliver bathed him profoundly in a slow, sweet smile and moved, without more encouragement, to the door.

Mopping his forehead with the handkerchief usually sacred to the decoration of his breast-pocket Plimsoll returned to the window. He leaned forward.

Young Mr. Dolliver had descended from his place behind the wheel and now sat on the outer running board, screened from chance observation from the office doorway. For the moment he had ceased to abstain from action.

His right hand moved to and fro, held close to the rubber covering of the running board, and his lips, too, moved as constantly. Unlearned though he was in certain matters, it was instantly clear to Mr. Plimsoll that the Reincarnate Buddha was not engaged in any form of incantation connected with his mother's newest religion, or, indeed, with any other religion.

Emanating from the opening palm of his right hand and rolling forth, to be snatched up again with unmistakable dexterity, a pair of large green dice preoccupied him.

CHAPTER TWO

THE front door of the graystone Gothic manor hall on the summit of East Hill opened, as Belden Plimsoll descended from his limousine, with deferential eagerness, as if the maidservant had stood behind it all day in ardent expectation of this moment, but Plimsoll did not respond to the respectfully urgent welcome.

Instead, pausing on the terrace, he broke a lifelong rule forbidding indecision and allowed himself to hesitate, his glance rising to an upper oriel window with something akin to caution and dubiety, and when he moved it was not toward the invitation of the wide, gracious corridor, but along the terrace of the descending sweep of lawn and shrubbery at the end of the ashlar wall. Here, in the face of outraged protest from the landscaper, he had planted a miniature orchard of dwarf apple trees, and these, for the first time, were now in early process of bearing fruit.

Plimsoll's face brightened as he approached them. The small green globes clinging to the boughs gave him a sense of harvest and increase, the just, lawful consequence of forethought, wisdom and endeavor. He was pleased with his little apple trees and, because they were so particularly his, with himself. Obedient little trees, fulfilling their duty, trees doing decorously precisely what was expected and required of them.

In one of them, however, a pair of robins had impudently built a nest, and their progeny, misinterpreting the sound of Plimsoll's approach, opened wide their yellow-edged beaks and yawped fretfully for angle-

worms. Plimsoll's face hardened as he observed that the young birds were almost grown, full-fledged and lusty. They made him think of Gilbert Dolliver.

These birds and Gilbert were alike the consequence of bad parental policy, and it annoyed Belden Plimsoll that he could not justly dislike them on their own account.

He was frowning when he turned from the apple trees, but when he entered the house there was a resolute good-humor in the voice that he despatched before him, good-humor veneered above assured and justified authority.

Only Albertine's welcoming "Yoo-hoo, papa" answered him from the library, and he frowned again. Either Lollie wasn't waiting for him or else she had deliberately rebuffed by silence his gay, announcing hail. The alternatives were equally unpleasant. Plimsoll felt, below the resentment of flouted discipline, a stab of self-pity, the shrewd, sharp pang of the serpent's tooth.

Lollie knew how he counted on this daily brief reunion before dinner, on the merry little ritual of arriving hail and answer. It wasn't much to ask as a return for all he'd done, was doing. He thought of those four beautiful young men he would bring home with him tomorrow and a hurting lump swelled in his throat. A father in a thousand, a million, and this was what he got!

He was wounded afresh to find, when he came into the long, pleasant book-walled room, that Lollie was present. She reclined at ease in the deep chair usage reserved for Belden Plimsoll's own occupancy, and her posture seemed to aggravate, intentionally, this ungenerous trespass, for, thoroughly aware of her father's aversion to such uncouth sprawlings, she had

chosen to slide far down in the chair, so that her body was supported chiefly on shoulder blade and hip, her legs projecting impudently, the toes of her shoes turned inward in that pigeon fashion notoriously most unlovely in her father's sight.

He was not a close observer of feminine apparel, and it did not immediately occur to him to wonder why Lollie, instead of her usual high-heeled and fragile footgear, should be wearing black leather shoes, stoutly built, low of heel and mysteriously soled with metal. Only as these were, in some obscurely purposeful fashion, forced upon his notice, did he focus his curiosity upon them, and although an intuition warned him against it, this curiosity moved him to forthright remark.

"What's the idea of the hobnailed shoes, Lollie?"

It was a civil question, even, by dint of strong intention, jocular and paternally affectionate, but it moved Lollie to a display of weary, long-suffering patience under ignorant injury. She smiled faintly, moved her shoulders in a melancholy shrug and, exhaling smoke, burdened it with a small, tired sigh, making, except for this, no answer.

It was Albertine who spoke, her voice eagerly pacifying, the voice of one who, before the storm, sheds oil upon uneasy waters.

"They're dancing shoes, papa. Wait till you see how Lollums can use them! Show papa, Lollums."

Lollie repeated the patient sigh. "Could you possibly call me something else, now and then, mother? You know how I loathe baby talk."

"I'm sorry." Albertine was breathlessly penitent. "But do switch on the radio and let papa see——"

"And would you mind," said Lollie, as one who completes an interrupted request, "not talking to me

about letting papa see, as if I wouldn't know what you meant if you called father Belden? I believe he's my father. You really don't have to keep assuring me of it."

"I'm sorry," said Albertine again. "But do show him, anyway."

"Come on," urged Plimsoll. He could understand, even sympathize, with Lollie's distaste for Albertine's persistent use of the baby manner in addressing her, and his interest in any new accomplishment on Lollie's part helped him to overlook the impropriety of her tone. Pride revived in him hopefully. He was suddenly quite sure that Lollie would be good at dancing in those metal-shod slippers. Lollie was good at everything.

"All *right!*" Lollie stressed the second word a shade more than seemed fair to her father. After all, he hadn't exactly pestered her to let him see her dance. She rose, crossed to the radio, her shoes clicking on the bare floor. A bray and snore of brass elbowed its way profanely in upon the mellow dignity of the room. Lollie, her face suddenly impassive, seemed to be suspended from invisible wires, just far enough above the floor to permit her feet to reach it. Her body, above her hips, might have been turned to wood, and as if to employ the vitality thus husbanded, her legs and feet became possessed of unnatural, incredible agility and restlessness.

They moved in a kind of conventionalized St. Vitus quiver; they squirmed and twisted and darted to the bleating snort of saxophones and the chatter of heel and toe; they tapped and shuffled and kicked with an abandon, a wild, frolicking zest residing wholly in themselves, a gaiety altogether independent of the upper half of Lollie; they were feet and legs released

on holiday from the dull business of carrying a burden, and gleefully a-gambol, like children running joyously away from school.

Belden Plimsoll stared. He had seen such dancing, of course, on the stage, and he knew that this performance, amazing as it was on the part of his daughter, fell vastly short in technical excellence of the simpler movements of the ordinary professional, but it ministered gratefully to his pride; it healed the wounds smarting in his spirit; it moved him, irresistibly, to delighted laughter.

Instantly Lollie ceased to dance. She touched the switch and, succeeding tumult and fevered movement, stillness and immobility seemed to be positively, almost materially, present in the room.

"I knew you'd laugh, of course," said Lollie, repeating the long-suffering shrug. "I knew better than to suppose you'd realize——"

She left the speech in the air, resumed her cigarette. Plimsoll found himself, bewildered, on his defense against some accusation as yet utterly unexplicit. His mouth, open to release good-humored, approving laughter, remained in this position.

"It may look ridiculous to you," said Lollie, "but considering where I've had to study, it's really not so funny as you think. But I didn't expect you to take it seriously. I know you and mama are perfectly sure I'm nothing but an infant moron."

"I thought it was first-rate," said Plimsoll, rallying tardily under surprise attack. "I could hardly believe it was my daughter——" he perceived that the words had been unhappily chosen. Lollie's head lifted, sagged wearily once more.

"Considering where I've had to study," she repeated, "considering that I've had to learn from the

kind of teachers you can find in a one-horse little Bible-belt town like Lakeport——"

Again she left the sentence in suspense.

"It's great," said Plimsoll. He felt that it would be just as well, in the circumstances, to permit the blasphemous allusion to his city to pass unrebuked. "You're a wonder, Lollie. I've seen worse clogging than that right on the stage."

"Clogging!" Lollie sighed. Albertine spoke hurriedly.

"They call it tapping, papa."

"Papa again!" Lollie's sigh was still more eloquent of patient endurance.

"I meant to say Belden," Albertine apologized. "It's not the same thing as clogging, Belden. Not the same thing at all."

"It looked——" Plimsoll stopped at the storm signals that were hoisted in his daughter's gaze. "It certainly looked fine, whatever you call it." He let his hand fall gently on Lollie's shoulder and, although she stiffened perceptibly, she suffered the caress without more definite signs of displeasure.

"You'll have to stage another performance for us tomorrow night," he said, happily inspired by the memory of the pleasant surprise in store. "The new Class C men are coming up to dinner."

He chuckled.

"I may not be much of a judge of cl— of tapping, but you've certainly got to admit that I bring a lot of boys around the house, and pretty nice ones, too. Wait till you see these four new ones!"

"I'll wait," said Lollie.

Plimsoll overcame the weakness of feeling injured. There was a pause, broken at last by Albertine's inquiry, belated but solicitous, as to the day's labor at

the office. It provided Belden Plimsoll with another cue.

"Oh, about as usual. Nothing out of the ordinary except a call from Pansy Dolliver."

He carefully did not notice the peculiar suggestion of a process that could hardly be described, in a person of Albertine's soft gentleness, as bristling, but for which he had found no better word. He had developed a technic for dealing with these confessions—for to Albertine they were unmistakably confessions—of Pansy's occasional visits to his office. They must be confessed, always and at once; they must be confessed in exactly this key of amused, faintly compassionate weariness. Otherwise, even Albertine could be difficult.

"That—woman!"

As Albertine said it the word became definitely the ultimate in epithet.

"She's turned Buddhist this time."

"I'm not surprised." Albertine's tone suggested that conversion to this faith involved obscure and shocking enormity of which no one but Pansy Dolliver would have been capable.

"Yes. She thinks that worthless, overgrown pup of hers is——" Plimsoll stopped, remembering his promise to keep secret, for the present, the high destiny in store for Gilbert. The topic of Gilbert, luckily, seemed to divert Albertine from that of his mother.

"That horrible boy!"

Plimsoll's voice warmed as he described what he had seen of the horrible boy, this afternoon.

"It just made my feet ache to give him what he needed—sitting there right in front of my office, independent as a hog on ice, shooting craps with himself while his mother was trying to tell me he was——" again he caught himself in time. "Pansy's done her

best to spoil him, of course, but I guess he didn't need much help."

Lollie, extinguishing her cigarette, moved toward the door.

"Well, toodle-oo," she said negligently. "I've got to dress."

"Going out?"

There was a note of expostulation in Plimsoll's question. Always when Lollie deserted the family dinner-table it seemed to infringe on his rights. Even as he spoke, however, he was aware of a queer, reprehensible, unfatherly sense of relief.

"If you can call it that," said Lollie. "Marv Hallowell's taking me."

Relief became definite in Plimsoll. Marvin Hallowell had been one of the best of last year's hand-picked recruits, and his record since his arrival in Lakeport had been altogether soothing to Plimsoll both as employer and as parent of a marriageable daughter.

"That's fine," he said heartily. "Have a good time."

"It will be better," drawled Lollie, "than just good. You might even call it pious."

She dawdled past the doorway. Belden Plimsoll's slight frown smoothed swiftly into fond, smiling complacency.

There took place in him an everyday miracle, a phenomenon so commonplace that he accepted it without any realization of its mystery and wonder.

The instant Lollie, in the masquerade disguise of flesh and blood, was no longer present to distort and confuse his vision, the real Lollie reappeared, the Lollie of the photographs, the perfect daughter, loyal, loving, dutiful and, best of all, transparent—that Lollie

whose every thought was knowable and known to Belden Plimsoll.

It was one of the things in which Albertine failed. When the actual Lollie went out of the room where Albertine remained, the other Lollie, the real one, did not enter in her place. Belden Plimsoll was aware of this, just as of other respects in which he was luckier than Albertine. He knew it wasn't Albertine's fault; he forgave her for it—he was even glad that she didn't share his possession of that real Lollie.

He didn't think of doubting the accuracy of his private vision. It had never occurred to him that there might be anything in common between Belden Plimsoll and the deluded mother of that young gunman, the poor woman who couldn't understand that the jury had to deal with the rat-faced man in the dock and not with the jolly, crowing little baby that she thought she saw there. He had no remotest suspicion of any likeness between his own undeceivable clearness of sight as to Lollie and that pathetic passion for self-delusion which, if Pansy Dolliver had happened to look out of his window this afternoon, would have seen the Reincarnate Buddha behind that false seeming of an utterly worthless young scapegrace absorbed in secret practice with a pair of large green dice.

"She's a wonder!" said Belden Plimsoll of the daughter who now came back into clear focus in his thought. "That was pretty good clogging, Teenie. And considering that the child's just picked it up——"

"She's been taking lessons for two months," said Albertine. "And they call it tapping. It seems to upset her frightfully if I forget and speak of it as clogging."

Plimsoll laughed indulgently. It was like Lollie—the real Lollie—to wait until she had learned some-

thing before trying to show off. In this, as in everything else Belden Plimsoll's daughter was remarkably like him.

"She seems to be dreadfully in earnest about it," said Albertine.

There was in her voice and look a suggestion of anxiety that seemed faintly amusing to her husband.

"No harm in it. Good exercise."

Albertine said nothing, but her mouth tightened, as if, no matter what Plimsoll might say, she meant to keep on being worried. He switched on the radio and became comfortably absorbed in an endeavor to tune in on San Francisco, an effort presently crowned by success. The voice of the lady who was broadcasting was profoundly contralto and her message had to do with an imminent Be-Kind-to-the-Kiddies Week, but in these matters Belden Plimsoll enjoyed the mental attitude of the true sportsman, concerned with the chase rather than the kill. He listened happily, shaking his head when Albertine would have interrupted.

"Sh. It's Frisco!"

He was exploring the ether in quest of other triumphs when young Mr. Hallowell arrived. Mr. Hallowell took an intelligent interest in the search and Plimsoll's opinion of him, already high, went up a little higher.

A first-rate fellow, Hallowell, already showing signs that he would develop into one of the strongest men in the whole Export Division, but not, after all, the right man for Lollie. Not quite.

Not by a thousand miles, Plimsoll decided, as his daughter, after a regrettable unpunctuality, danced with gay impenitence into the room. There was no disagreement now between the Lollie of material fact and that Lollie who smiled forth from the photograph,

or, if there was a difference, it was in favor of the actual Lollie, who lightly slipped an arm about her father's startled shoulders and whose rose-petal mouth bestowed a gossamer kiss upon his cheek, whose voice, warm and round and creamily soprano, took leave, explicitly, of Daddy Dear.

Plimsoll observed the rapt wistfulness with which young Mr. Hallowell witnessed this charming revealment of daughterly devotion, and a pang of compassion for that doomed, hopeless yearning was tempered by the feeling that it served Hallowell right to suffer. Plainly he had dared to lift his dreams impudently above his station. Nerve, thought Plimsoll. Capetown or Buenos Aires. . . .

Lollie's creamy laughter bubbled back as she departed beside young Hallowell's wide-shouldered humility. The rose-petal kiss lingered on her father's cheek and he smiled happily. Albertine, however, continued to look worried, and at the dinner-table she put her anxiety, with a certain timidity, into words.

"She's queer about this tap-dancing, Belden."

"Good exercise," said Plimsoll. "Do her good to prance about that way."

"It's not the dancing that worries me," said Albertine. "It's the ideas she seems to get out of it." She hesitated. "Did you notice what she said about Lakeport?"

"Oh, that didn't mean anything." In his present mood Plimsoll could forgive Lollie even that disrespectful reference to the finest little city east—or, for that matter, west—of the Mississippi.

"I don't know. She keeps talking that way about it." Albertine shook her head. "She wants——" she hesitated, her glance seeming to measure the degree of

Plimsoll's good humor—"she says she can't possibly learn to be a real tap-dancer if she stays here."

Plimsoll looked up.

"Stays here? If? Where else would she stay?"

"She says," said Albertine, "that she has to go to New York. There's a colored man there who gives lessons. She——"

"New York!" Plimsoll stared. "You don't mean to say you take any such fool talk seriously?"

"She sounds serious," Albertine insisted. "She keeps talking about it as if——" her lip quivered slightly—"as if I were stupid not to realize how important it is. It's her career, she says, and we haven't got any right to prevent her from——"

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense! Don't pay any attention to it. Just a kid's fool talk—like wanting to be an aviator or a trained nurse!"

"The trouble is that Lollie's not a child," said Albertine. "And even when she was little, if she made up her mind about anything she always got her way. If she's made it up that she's going to New York to live, she'll either go there or——"

"Or what, for heaven's sake?" Plimsoll spoke testily. "Of course there's nothing in this—it's just some wild idea of yours—but suppose you're right? Suppose Lollie is crazy enough to want to pass up a home like this and the life she lives here and shut herself up in a dinky room in some New York alley and take clogging lessons from a black hoofer? You can see that it's crazy, but say it isn't. Say she really means it. What of it? She can't go unless I let her, can she? She can't even buy a ticket if I don't give her the money. She can't pay rent and board and buy clothes and hire this teacher unless I foot the bills, even if I didn't have any other way of controlling her. That's so, isn't it?"

"You needn't shout at me," said Albertine. "*I* don't want her to go. At least——"

"Well, do you think I do? You know she can't go unless I let her. Think I'm apt to let her?"

"I think," said Albertine slowly, "that if she's really made up her mind to go you'll either let her do it or——"

"Or what?"

"Or she'll make us both wish you had. She's begun that already."

"It's all nonsense," said Belden Plimsoll. "The whole thing's just fantastic. Why on earth would she want to get away from home? A home like this! Why——"

"I'm sure *I* don't know," said Albertine, "but she does. And she gets away from it as much as she can, too. She can't *bear* Marvin Hallowell, but she'd rather go off with him to some awful place than spend an evening at home."

"The Country Club's not so awful," said Plimsoll. He had been at great pains and expense to make it, indeed, inviting and innocently pleasant as a place for Lollie and her playmates.

"If she goes there," said Albertine with sinister meaning.

"If? Of course she'll go there? Why shouldn't she?"

"I wish I knew." Albertine sighed. "I wish I knew what's got into all the boys and girls. They're all like that. They're bound and dee-termined not to stay at home, and the lovelier homes we give them and the harder we try to make those homes happy and gay and comfortable, the crazier they are to get away! Sometimes I just want to give up and *die!*"

"Now, now!" Belden Plimsoll recognized these

omens. There were times when, dimly, he suspected that melancholy and tears served Albertine as a kind of entertainment, and he had discovered, certainly, that they could be averted by the timely suggestion of some other form of pastime.

"Let's see if we can get the Cartwrights to come over for some contract," he proposed. It was a shrewd stroke. Albertine had taken a course of lessons in contract; she was able, across the card table, to feel immensely wiser and more learned than her husband and therefore adored the game for the same reason that Belden Plimsoll loathed it.

She brightened instantly and departed blithely to the telephone.

The Cartwrights came, and Albertine's ritual of counts and bids, vindicated by eighteen dollars of winnings, completely restored her spirits, but for Belden Plimsoll the game held no such power to soothe and comfort. Under correction, not only from Albertine herself but from both of the Cartwrights, he suffered from a dangerous lessening of self-confidence, the very self-confidence he needed to reassure him against that dim, persistent shadow of impending trouble over Lollie.

It hung above him till he fell asleep; it darkened his dreams; in the morning, as he went out toward the stables, it deepened his uneasy fear of horses and his detestation of riding one of these formidable and sinister animals on an hour's journey that accomplished nothing except a return—under Providence—to its beginning.

The saddle horse in wait for him was ancient and sedate, a horse than could be trusted not to gallop, but Belden Plimsoll scrambled to the saddle with a definite sense of danger, of imminent disaster, and, as he rode

out toward the highway, kept a wary, vigilant restraint upon the bridle reins.

To reach the safety of the bridle paths in the park, it was necessary only to cross the strip of concrete at the end of the drive, and at this hour there was little likelihood of traffic, but Plimsoll halted, nevertheless, before venturing upon the passage.

He scowled. Parked on the far side of the road so that it partly blocked the entrance to the bridle path, he saw a motor car, saw and knew it for the same disgraceful relic that had yesterday profaned the bluestone driveway at the plant. Behind the wheel, moreover, sat Gilbert Dolliver.

He was not at once aware of Plimsoll's presence. He did not look up from his intent inspection of the mysterious and formidable apparatus with which his hands were busy, a great cylinder of polished wood to which bits of bright metal were affixed, a long wooden tube with a bent metal mouthpiece projecting from it like the stem of an old-fashioned Dutchman's pipe.

This apparatus distracted Belden Plimsoll's unfriendly notice from Gilbert Dolliver himself. Anything mechanical was, as always, a challenge to Plimsoll's wits, demanding to be understood. He loosened rein and the venerable horse plodded solemnly across the pavement. The clink of shod hoofs drew Mr. Dolliver's attention. He looked up, frowning as if he resented this intrusion, but, at the sight of Belden Plimsoll, this frown abated slightly. Gravely but without cordiality Mr. Dolliver nodded, the nod of one who, concerned with affairs of moment, is still patiently courteous toward his inferiors.

He wore dinner garments now in some disarray; the bosom of his shirt was rumpled and no longer spotless and his tie had worked a little to one side. It was evi-

dent to Plimsoll that his own day had slightly overlapped, as to Gilbert Dolliver, the night before.

"What's that thing you've got there?"

Plimsoll spoke curtly but considering the circumstance, curtness was almost overkind.

"Bassoon," said Dolliver, as curtly. He fiddled earnestly with the mouthpiece, blew into it without reward in sound, and, removing it, swore plaintively below his breath.

Plimsoll clicked to his horse. He knew that a bassoon was an implement of music, and his roused curiosity was content. His opinion of Gilbert Dolliver had been pleasantly lowered by that young man's failure to operate even this simple and ignoble piece of machinery, and he rode on in a humor somehow lifted by the encounter.

There was, however, a queer feeling at the back of his consciousness as to the Reincarnate Buddha—a conviction, reached by some process deeper than reason, that Gilbert Dolliver was dangerous, dangerous in some fashion immediate and personal to Belden Plimsoll.

He so far surrendered to this fancy as to halt the horse, to turn about in the saddle and look back.

He was in this relaxed, unwary posture when Gilbert's persistency as to the bassoon was suddenly rewarded.

In the same posture, as if supported upon the hoarse, hollow thunder of a mighty groan, Plimsoll hung in the air, observing between upflung knees the departure of a tossing saddle and the outraged beast that bore it, an animal for whom Plimsoll, before he began tardily to fall, had time to feel a pang of fellowship and sympathy. Still in the posture, loosely, of one who sits, he came to earth.

By the time he reached the turnpike Gilbert had gone, as if he had lingered only long enough to perpetrate his well-planned villainy. There was no target for the violent words and deeds of Plimsoll's warm intention. He was a man of nice restraints in speech, even—indeed especially—in the privacy of his home, but the terms in which, arrived in Albertine's apartment, he saw fit to describe the adventure and to voice his sentiments as to Gilbert Dolliver, were the strong, salt words of uncouth, elemental manhood, deeply moved.

Albertine sat up in bed.

"Belden! Do you realize that Lollie can hear every word you're saying? Do you want her to hear her father talking like a——?"

Plimsoll, with a convulsive effort, forced himself to conclude his address in impassioned whisper, but the mischief had been done. Beyond the intervening walls his daughter had also risen abruptly in her bed.

She had heard. Her face, however, betrayed no sign of the shocked pain it might pardonably have revealed. For a moment, indeed, it was almost as respectfully admiring as in that photograph on Plimsoll's desk. But only for a moment.

Intense thoughtfulness sobered it. The eyes narrowed and the mouth hardened, with a striking resemblance to her father's, into resolute decision. A cunning student of physiognomy, contemplating Miss Leila Plimsoll's countenance, might have inferred that she had determined upon a course that would be unpleasant in itself but wholesome in purpose and effect —something, for instance, like swallowing a large dose of medicine, bitter but almost certain to be efficacious.

She pounded her pillow flat and returned to slumber. It was not till after midday that she descended to the

telephone closet below the stairs. For once, although her mother sat within easy earshot, she forbore to shut the door.

She asked for a number. Then—Mrs. Plimsoll, in the next room gasped faintly—then, in Lollie's very creamiest soprano:

"Hello, Gilbert. This is Lollie. Listen, darling!"

CHAPTER THREE

MR. PLIMSOLL glared forbiddingly at his visitor. "What do you mean by disobeying orders this way, Noonan? It's thoroughly understood that you're to write out your reports and never show your face anywhere near the plant."

Mr. Noonan shook his head. He was a blunt, thick man, remarkably short of neck and blue as to jowl; his jaw protruded belligerently and his eyes were the color of lake ice, but his aspect, at this moment, was not formidable. He was worried.

"I got a daughter of my own," he said. His pale-blue glance shifted to the photograph at Mr. Plimsoll's elbow. "That's why I doped it out that I'd better handle this thing person'ly. Other people around here get a look at my reports and there's no telling who might be listening in if I phoned."

Plimsoll's frown darkened. Noonan mopped his forehead.

"I was tailing Hallowell last night, Mr. Plimsoll."

Forgetting the cogent reasons for sitting lightly Plimsoll started unwarily in his chair. Noonan misunderstood the sudden anguish of his look.

"I guess, maybe, you know about it already," he suggested.

Plimsoll, like most great men, had a fixed habit of never admitting ignorance if the confession could be avoided.

"I might as well hear what you've got to say, now that you're here."

"Well, I guess you know who Hallowell was with, anyhow."

Plimsoll nodded, his lips tight.

"Well, he and—and the young lady drove over to Sawneytown and had dinner at a joint they call the Buttright Inn."

He paused, as if disturbed by Plimsoll's countenance, but his employer nodded curtly, as if the information that Lollie had not dined, after all, at the Lakeport Country Club, had no news interest for him.

"I was wondering whether you knew about that," said Noonan. "It's kind of a rough place, but they're all kind of rough, these days."

A very black mark went down against the name of Marvin Hallowell in Belden Plimsoll's mental ledgers.

"Well, afterwards they drove around nowheres in p'ticular for a couple hours and fine'ly they stopped in at a sort of dance-joint over at Rutter's Pond. It's—well, it's like all the rest of them."

A blacker mark, this time, for Hallowell. Rutter's Pond! Why, wasn't that where those rum runners had adjusted a slight difference of opinion, last month, with automatic pistols?

"I got a table next to 'em. I could hear what they said—couldn't help hearing it. And I figured I better come in here and tell you person'ly. I got a daughter of my own——"

"Well——" Plimsoll's voice creaked slightly—"what did you hear?"

Noonan visibly took a firmer grip on his courage.

"She's all set to run out on you, Mr. Plimsoll. She's going to beat it to New York and get a job in some night club."

Plimsoll laughed. "Oh, that! I'm surprised you let that nonsense fool you, Noonan. It's just childish

talk. All children are going to run away and join the circus. You ought to know that."

"It didn't listen to me like any pipe dream," said Noonan. "Miss—the young lady didn't strike me like she was kidding herself. No, sir. She meant it, and you can write it on your cuff! She had Hallowell worried as bad as I was—had him talking to her like a probation officer! Of course you know best, but if it'd been my daughter pulling that line I'd be sitting up and taking notice, I'm telling you—a whole lot of notice!"

Plimsoll shook his head. Of course Noonan's daughter was an altogether different problem. Noonan's daughter didn't live in a great gracious manor house, with everything a girl's heart could desire; Noonan's daughter didn't have cars of her own, and horses, and clothes straight from Paris; Noonan's daughter wasn't surrounded by flawless young men scientifically handpicked out of the colleges.

If Noonan's daughter took it into her head that she wanted to be a dancer in a New York night club, Noonan would have a right to be worried. Plimsoll was sorry for the fellow, no longer merely the hard-boiled ex-detective of his outward seeming, but a brother member, now, in the Ancient Order of Parents.

"I know all about it," said Plimsoll. "It's just talk. But I'm obliged to you for handling it this way. Cigar?"

Noonan bit the end from the belted perfecto.

"It's the way I'd want it handled if it was my girl," he said, between teeth clenched in the cigar. "I didn't suppose it was as bad as it sounded, but I thought you ought to know, anyhow."

"Quite right," said Plimsoll. "You couldn't be expected to know that I'm not like most fathers—the

last people on earth to find out what their children are doing. I've always made it my business to be better acquainted with my daughter than anybody else is, and no matter what wild idea she may get into her head, she'll talk it over with me quicker than with anyone else."

Noonan nodded. "That's the way. That's how I am with Eileen—just like a coupla buddies. But there ain't many fathers could say the same—no, nor mothers either." He frowned. "Last night, all the time I was watching Gilly Dolliver, I kep' thinking about his poor mother. The way she's spent her whole life on that boy—and the way he's got her fooled, right now——!"

Plimsoll's scowl bit deep. Very gingerly he changed his position.

"Oh. He was there too, was he?"

"For a while. Long enough to send one of the boys in the band to the cleaners with them trained dice—but that ain't fair, either, because it don't matter what bones he's shooting he's bad news in any man's crap game." Noonan wagged his head. "He got this jazz-shooter's roll in about six passes and after that he took him for his—well, I don't know what you call it, but it's some kind of a dingus you play—five-six feet long and makes a grunt like a tug-boat whistle, only lower down."

"A bassoon," suggested Plimsoll. His bruises as to body and spirit were in no wise soothed by this light as to the origin of the instrument immediately responsible for them.

"Maybe. I didn't hear the name, because the fight started pretty soon after he won it, and——"

"There was a fight, eh?" Plimsoll found a grim

satisfaction in the memory of Gilbert's ruffled plumage. Noonan clicked his tongue.

"Oh, sure. Any time you run into Gilly Dolliver you can bet on seeing a crap game or a scrap and generally both. Funny, too—he don't look much like a scrapper, with them nice pink cheeks, and his lazy grin and the way he always coughs before he talks, as if he kind of felt fussed, but he's a hell-devil when he starts, Mr. Plimsoll—a sweetheart in a rough and tumble if I ever seen one. You ought to've seen him slap Hallowell down and out in one sock—pretty, that's all—pretty!"

"Hallowell!" Plimsoll sat up quickly and regretted it.

"It wasn't his fault. If he'd been looking for trouble he maybe wouldn't have got it the way he did. Gilly was grinning when he socked him—just one slap, right on the button, and that was that."

"But what started it? How did Dolliver come to——"

"Well, it's funny, but I've seen it happen two-three times just the same way. I don't get it, myself, but there's something it ain't safe to call Gilly Dolliver—some kind of a pet name, sounds like. Call him that and you're all mixed up in war. Boodie or something."

"Buddha?"

"That's it." Noonan's eye became respectful. "I can see you know a whole lot about it."

Plimsoll nodded.

"Hallowell called him Buddha and Dolliver resented it. Go on."

"That's all there was—there wasn't any more," said Noonan. "Gilly slaps Hallowell down and six-eight waiters give Gilly the air."

"I know that." Mr. Plimsoll spoke in the manner of one who listens patiently to a story already twice-told. "What I want to know is what started the trouble. Why did Hallowell refer to Dolliver, I mean, by this—this fighting term?"

Mr. Noonan's eye shifted to the pictured loveliness of Lollie. It was impossible for Plimsoll not to understand the innuendo of that glance. He drew in his breath quickly but otherwise contrived to preserve an outward calm.

"Three is about as much of a crowd as it used to be in my time, I guess," said Noonan. "Hallowell didn't seem to get much of a kick out of having Gilly Dolliver in his party and one thing sort of led up to another."

Still Plimsoll remained outwardly unmoved, except for a slight tightening of jaw and fist.

"Dolliver tried to force himself on—on the others?"

Noonan hesitated. "Well, I wouldn't call it that, exactly. Miss—the young lady didn't tell you Gilly tried to butt in, did she?"

"No," said Plimsoll truthfully.

"I didn't figure she would," said Noonan. "I figured she'd be the kind to own up if she started something."

"You—you think that something my daughter said or did might have begun the bad feeling between the young men?" Belden Plimsoll held his voice to resolute calm. Noonan nodded.

"You see Gilly Dolliver had just won this—this bassoon thing off the jazz-shooter, and he's sitting by himself, trying to get the hang of it and—and the other two go over to his table——"

"You mean to say that Hallowell actually took my daughter over to talk to him?"

"Well, he went along," said Noonan uneasily. "He

was trying to get her away, though, when the riot started. He was talking to her when he pulled this crack about Boo——"

"I see." Plimsoll arrived at final judgment on the case of Marvin Hallowell. He was guilty on all counts. He'd taken Lollie to this dance hall, a den frequented by people like young Gilbert Dolliver. He had led her into actual conversation with Dolliver, and, tardily realizing this offense, had found no better way of rectifying it than by precipitating a disgraceful row in which he had been ignominiously slapped upon the button. Whatever his superiors in the Export Division might believe as to Hallowell's business ability, it was clear that he didn't belong in Lakeport. There was an opening in the Valparaiso office where Hallowell's business talents could be usefully employed and where his social shortcomings wouldn't matter. So much for Hallowell.

As for Lollie—under the glow of the photographed smile the sternness faded out of Plimsoll's countenance. Lollie wasn't to be blamed. She'd been encouraged to entrust herself to the escort of Marvin Hallowell; of course Noonan had been mistaken in his fantastic notion that she had deliberately sought the society of Gilbert Dolliver, but even if her innocent curiosity as to that bassoon had actually led her into such a mistake, the fault still lay with Hallowell for having taken her to a place where such mistakes could happen.

The telephone buzzer hummed. Albertine's voice quivered over the wire. In her distressed excitement she was even less lucid than usual, but she was able to make Plimsoll understand two of the reasons for her state of mind.

Lollie had called up Gilbert Dolliver.

Lollie had called him darling.

"Can't you DO something, papa? Can't you DO something?"

"I'll attend to it, Teenie. Just stop worrying and leave it to me."

In the act of hanging up the receiver he arrived at one of his Napoleonic decisions. He spoke to Noonan with the curt, brusque voice of authority.

"From now till further notice you drop everything else and watch young Dolliver. Report to me here, once a day. No telephoning. No writing. I want an absolutely full account of everything he does. Everything."

Noonan rose. His ice-colored eye brightened slightly, but he showed no other trace of emotion.

"All right, sir. You'll get it."

In his nondescript little car he permitted himself, however, to wag his head, to commune with himself aloud.

"And you'll get it good," he muttered not without compassion, past the bitten remnant of Plimsoll's gift cigar.

Plimsoll's pretensions had deceived him, for a little while, but it was now apparent to the father of Eileen Noonan that he stood alone, as he had always believed, among fathers of daughters. He knew all that there was to know about his Eileen.

CHAPTER FOUR

GREETED, as he emerged from his bedroom at noon, by the highly unvegetarian aroma of frying pork chops and the spatting bubble of the skillet, Mr. Gilbert Dolliver, in bathrobe and heelless slippers, pursued the heartening sound and smell down the back stairway to their source.

The aspect he exhibited as he shuffled into the kitchen would have confirmed Mrs. Pansy Dolliver's beliefs as to the identity of the spirit now inhabiting the fleshly tenement of her son. It was a serene face that met the mustang eye of the cook, a face of innocence and amity, flushed by slumber and cleansed of care, and it worked, in spite of her visible reluctance, its usual effect of disarmament on Zenia.

She did not speak, but she forked a golden chop from the skillet to a plate—a plate in readiness on the oil-clothed table, as if intended for Zenia's midday use, but, to a close observer, destined for another purpose, for it was not a kitchen plate.

Also without speech Gilbert seated himself and became concerned with knife and fork. Zenia eyed him above her skillet.

"Reckon you ain' goin' git you soul no looser long 's you eat you two-th'ee 'em po'k chop ev'ey mo'nin'."

Gilbert's face clouded slightly and his glance shifted toward the stair with an apprehension Zenia sought to reassure.

"You got plenty time. She ain' goin' come down till 'at ole Suwanee Rivuh git yeah."

Her voice put unloving stress on this private rendering of the Swami's title. She laughed suddenly, a shrill, high, delighted squeal.

"I leave kitchen do' open so he got to smell 'ese po'k chop fryin'," she explained in answer to Gilbert's inquiring glance. "I bet you ole Suwanee nose itch him good. Ain' no collud man sit happy smellin' po'k chop he ain' goin' eat!"

"He isn't colored," said Gilbert. "I've told you over and over he's a Hindu, Zenie."

"Hindu or Skindu, he keep out'n my kitchen," said Zenia. "One nem mud browns, 'at whut he look like to me."

Gilbert shook his head but permitted the debate to lapse. He ate another chop.

"You doin' pretty good," Zenia commented. "Reckon you soul ain' goin' come loose iss mo'nin', nohow!"

Again Gilbert's face passed briefly into shadow.

"But you goin' git it good 'n' loose you keep on." Zenia nodded darkly. "Iceman tell me you fightin' again las' night. Say you git th'owed out 'at dance hall oveh to Rutteh's Pon'. One nese nights you goin' git you soul so loose it pull clean out!"

"I don't care. Nobody can call me—call me *that* and get away with it, that's all. I've got to stand enough without that."

"Somebody call you Gawdamma Booduck again?"

"Don't you do it!" Gilbert rose abruptly. "I don't let anybody call me that!"

"You mama say——"

"I know what she says," said Gilbert. "I can't help that. But I don't have to let anybody else call me——" he paused. "I won't stand it, that's all."

The telephone bell intervened. He shuffled almost

sulkily to answer it, and his opening hello was uttered in the tone he had employed with Zenia. His normal voice and manner, however, were instantly restored at the first word that came to him over the wire. He coughed apologetically; he confronted the transmitter with the same uneasy grin that he would have worn in the actual presence of Miss Leila Plimsoll.

"Why—why, hello, Lollie." His tone was mildly inquiring, as if he found it mystifying to be called up by Lollie Plimsoll, as if even the commonplace address of "darling" held, in these circumstances, an element of the unusual and baffling.

His part in the conversation, as audible to Zenia's attentive ear, consisted chiefly of yesses and noes, prefaced inevitably by his brief, deprecatory cough. He wore, as he climbed the stairs to his bedroom, a frown of puzzled meditation. It erased itself, however, at the sight of the bassoon, standing beside his bureau.

He closed the door and lifted the mouthpiece lovingly to his lips. Very gently he breathed into the reed, a breath wholly out of keeping with the profound, titanic mutter that resulted. Downstairs there was a tinkling crash as of fallen glassware; across the hall a door opened and the voice of Mrs. Dolliver, incorrigibly sweet even in alarm and pain, uprose in startled inquiry.

Swiftly Gilbert disposed of the bassoon behind the suits hanging in the open clothes closet. His face revealed a mind divided, the pleased pride of unexpected achievement overclouded by the recognition of certain difficulties in the way of secret practice as to bassoons.

"What on earth made that dreadful noise, dear?"

Mrs. Dolliver's face, as she turned it upon her son, softened into plenary absolution. Her hand, however,

remained against her breast in the gesture that survived her release, six religions back, from the illusion of bodily infirmity. It was still possible, this hand seemed gently to declare, that Mrs. Dolliver might fall back into error and suffer one of her old heart attacks.

"I'm sorry, mama," said Gilbert. "I didn't mean to scare you that way."

Mrs. Dolliver shook her head; her gaze became definitely one of adoration.

"You're so lovely, Baby! If you'd only wear that chela's robe the dear Swami gave you! Even your dressing gown makes you look so wonderfully like——" she smiled sadly, as if to forgive Gilbert for the hardness of heart that declined to suffer, even from his mama, specific allusions to that resemblance. "Run and dress, dear. Lal Chundra Dass will be here soon and I'll want the car."

Gilbert retreated to his room. His face, as he shaved, frowned at him from the glass with a deepening discontent, a dawning purpose. He counted the crumpled bills that lay on the bureau. Twenty-two dollars and some silver. Darkly he pocketed this; descending, clad, to encounter the blandness of Lal Chundra Dass, he returned the Swami's gravely unctuous salutations in a tone that caused Mrs. Dolliver's hand again to flutter to her heart. Hastily Gilbert heeded this gentle, warning gesture. He responded, now, in the set formula of greeting that was expected of him, and the Swami rearranged in its wonted serenity a countenance not wholly without warrant for Zenia's reference to mud browns.

Turning this plump countenance in the direction of the kitchen Lal Chundra Dass, moreover, permitted a wide-nostriled, flattish nose unmistakably to twitch.

Gilbert now entered upon his appointed tasks as chauffeur to the venerable motor car. He looked, as he drove it, neither to left nor right, thus avoiding the interested attention with which the car itself and the Swami's costume were observed from the sidewalks. His face, however, continued to exhibit the frown it had worn in his shaving mirror, and, arrived at Mrs. Homer Hoffmeister's door, he obdurately declined the suggestion that he enter to attend the meeting. Averting his eye from the upward movement of Mrs. Dolliver's left hand, he fastened it firmly on a nondescript little car that had halted a few yards behind his own, on a short-necked, blue-chinned man who chewed meditatively at the stub of a belted cigar.

Gilbert continued to watch the blue-chinned man until mama, perhaps because of the pure, wholesome open air, perhaps by reason of the Swami's presence, triumphed over the illusion of an impending heart attack, and, smiling bravely as one who strives to conceal both sadness and suffering, permitted Lal Chundra Dass to escort her up Mrs. Hoffmeister's front stairs.

Free, now, for an hour, Gilbert continued to wear the look of dark, stiffening resolve. He drove down town, and parking his car before the Union Station, waited beside it until a blue-chinned man, at the wheel of a dusty little car, drove out of his path. He entered the station and approached one of the ticket windows. A remarkably pale young man behind the grille greeted him tepidly by name.

"What's the fare to San Francisco, Fred?" Gilbert's short cough apologized for the question. The pallid young man evinced a feeble interest.

"Ninety-four fifty. You going out there, Gilly?"

Gilbert coughed again. "Well, I've been thinking about it. I'm going some place, anyway." He hesi-

tated. "How far could I get for around twenty-two dollars?"

The ticket seller grinned. "What's the matter with New York? Fare and Pullman 'd cost you twenty-one-eighty and you'd have a coupla dimes left to blow in on night clubs."

Gilbert remained soberly meditative.

"I guess," he said, "a good bassoon player might get a job in some night club."

"You play the bassoon?" Fred was less feebly interested.

"Well," said Gilbert, "I've got one." He pondered briefly. "Much obliged, Fred."

He turned. Encountering again the hard-boiled gaze of the blue-chinned man, now moving casually toward the ticket window, Gilbert returned its scrutiny with a frown and strode purposefully to the doorway.

Deeply preoccupied he drove circuitously back to Mrs. Homer Hoffmeister's, halting only to fortify himself at a convenient hot-dog stand against this evening's dinner of herbs and grasses. He paid no heed to the remarkably coincidental progress of the dusty little car, but, when he had stopped before Mrs. Hoffmeister's gate and was in the act of igniting a cigarette, his glance was arrested by the reappearance, in the mirror above the windshield, of the thickset man with a blue underslung jaw that had now become familiar.

Gilbert sat up straight. The mirror enabled him to observe the blue-chinned man without turning his head. He started his engine and drove around the square, informed by the glass that the dusty car, at a discreet distance, duplicated this manœuvre. It came to a standstill a little way behind him when, again, he halted before Mrs. Hoffmeister's dwelling.

Gilbert coughed twice. He descended, now, and walked deliberately to the corner, turned it without looking back, entered a convenient drug store and purchased a packet of cigarettes. Emerging, he came face to face with a fellow-pedestrian, a short-necked person, wearing a slightly dejected felt hat and holding firmly in his teeth the banded remnant of a cigar.

Without visible notice of Gilbert this man paused before the show window and stood in rapt contemplation of its display—a pyramid of bottles containing Mme. Cheri's Instantaneous Hair-Remover. Reflectively, almost wistfully, the thickset man's right hand stroked blue-stubbled jaws. Gilbert strolled back. He walked gladly, as one treading pneumatic flagstones. The blue-chinned man also returned, less exuberantly, to the dusty little car.

Gilbert's duties as chauffeur engaged him throughout the afternoon; he delivered Swami Lal Chundra Dass at his lodgings; he drove mama on her usual tour of the shops. Having participated in a dinner of rice and fruit and nuts he consented almost with alacrity to escort Mrs. Dolliver to a concert of chamber music at the home of Miss Amy Watkins; throughout all these activities his countenance revealed no hint of discontent. A glow, indeed, illuminated it; a glow so unmistakably exalted that Mrs. Dolliver, bidding her son good-night, bathed him in a gaze of swimming tenderness.

"You look so lovely, Baby! You always look lovely, but tonight you—if you'd only wear that chela's robe——"

The exalted look abruptly removed itself from Gilbert's face. Mama sighed softly; her hand rose to her heart, but the unfilial hardness of Gilbert's aspect did not thaw. She sighed again and closed her door.

Across the hallway Gilbert waited for the stripe of light to vanish from below that door. He waited for ten minutes after it had disappeared. Then, very carefully, his bassoon clasped below his arm, he tiptoed down the back stairs and out into the welcome of black velvet night.

The stable that now served as garage had been built as far from the house as the dimensions of the roomy lot permitted, so far indeed that even the complaining chatter of venerable gears, as Gilbert drove away along the alley at the back of the plot, did not disturb the peaceful stillness of Mrs. Dolliver's bedroom.

Gilbert drove slowly; in the matter of pace the car was, as befitted its aged dignity, conservative. Usually the glare of overtaking headlamps rested only briefly upon its windshield, but tonight a dazzling refraction remained persistently in front of Gilbert's eyes. He did not resent this. Indeed, as he turned into the driveway that swerved away from the paved turnpike skirting the park, and observed that the pursuing lamps still vigilantly maintained their watch upon him, he permitted an ejaculation of pleased conviction to escape his lips.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE cockles of Belden Plimsoll's heart were warm and the bruises lately suffered in body and in spirit were soothed and solaced.

Upon the profundity of the down cushion of his favorite chair it was possible to forget this morning's arrival, in the same posture, upon the rude earth of the bridle path, even to look back upon it as a feat, amusing and vaguely creditable, of horsemanship.

Cushioned as deeply as to the spirit by Lollie's wholly daughterly deportment throughout dinner and the two succeeding hours of conversation in the library, Plimsoll could now afford to smile at his groundless anxieties concerning her.

She sat upon the arm of his chair, her own arm lightly about his neck, her hand, from time to time, administering to his shoulder a pat of approval and affection. In this position she attracted and retained the rapt, chorused gaze of Messrs. Averey, Saltonstall, Westgate and Jarrett, and toward all of these young men Plimsoll felt a comfortable glow of complacent esteem.

Even as to Jarrett his opinion had undergone a favorable revision. At dinner and thereafter Jarrett had given no sign whatever of that loquacity which Plimsoll had yesterday resented in him. More decorously even than the others had he held his tongue, more steadfastly than any other had his gaze affixed itself to Lollie.

More than was usual, Plimsoll decided, Lollie in-

vited and justified this attention. As if to make amends for yesterday she had assumed tonight a costume more elaborate and formal than Plimsoll had expected her to wear for a small family dinner party, a dress wholly delightful to his fatherly eye and no less effective, he could see, to the eyes of the four young men—a dress that charmingly revealed the delicately sun-browned throat and arms and shoulders, that clung lovingly to the slenderness of her waist and fell in maidenly fullness almost to her ankles. Her dark hair was dressed so that it hid her ears and framed her face in softness.

It was impossible for Plimsoll to confuse this actual daughter with the unreal Lollie of last night, the flippant young stranger who lazed on her shoulder blades, who insolently smoked, who desired to dance for her living in a New York night club, who could voluntarily suffer the society of a worm like Gilbert Dolliver.

His daughter was this girl who sat beside him, this lovely, loving, innocent child whose little bubbly, cooing laughter trilled forth as gaily over his story of the two Irishmen and the pumpkin as if she heard it for the first time—this girl who affectionately patted her father's cheek without dreaming of the anguished wistfulness, the artless caress evoked in the four young men.

Jarrett, laughing more cordially than the rest at the anecdote about the pumpkin, regained the ground he had lost in Plimsoll's esteem. A keen sense of humor such as Jarrett manifestly possessed was a splendid asset to any young man. Perhaps, after all, that Capetown job could wait a little.

It was Jarrett, too, who knew when to go home, and who managed his farewells with more ease and polish than the others. With Lollie leaning in the gratified

bend of his arm Plimsoll beamed affably upon him and decided that it had been shrewd to defer his banishment.

A chorus of respectful good-nights came from the doorway. Lollie withdrew herself from the arm that had supported her.

"Nice boys, aren't they?"

Plimsoll chuckled comfortably. His daughter, now lighting her first cigarette of the evening, also laughed.

"Perfectly beautiful," she conceded. "It's too bad you make adding machines instead of collars."

Although the tone left something to be desired, the words were harmless enough for Plimsoll to take them jocularly.

"They are good-looking," he admitted.

"Yes," said Lollie. "And I'll bet you they're just as good as they're beautiful."

Plimsoll, not without effort, contrived to accept even this in a spirit of patient merriment.

"I hope so," he said.

"I think I'll go up to bed," said Albertine. She spoke, however, with a certain eagerness. "I—I've had a trying day."

Plimsoll patted her shoulder.

" 'Night, Teenie. I'll stay down and have a friendly smoke with Lollie." He closed his left eye eloquently and Albertine nodded understanding. She bade her daughter good-night with a hint, in tone and look, of timidity, as one who presumes greatly but means no offense.

" 'Night." Lollie was nonchalantly affable. Albertine departed and Plimsoll, having lighted a cigar, lowered himself carefully to the softness of his down cushion. The peculiar difficulty of opening and maintaining conversation with his daughter, a difficulty of

which he had only lately become aware, somehow was lessened by the hour, the solitude and the fellowship of smoke. For once he was reconciled to Lollie's cigarette.

"What's this I hear about your going to New York?"

He could speak genially, casually almost, as if discussing with a mere acquaintance some project in which Belden Plimsoll had no immediate or deep concern. Lollie exhaled slowly.

"Oh, I did think about it," she admitted. The past tense of the verb fell gratefully on Plimsoll's ear. He'd been right. She'd given up this notion, if she ever really had it, just as quickly as she'd recovered from other artless ambitions—the circus-rider idea, for instance, or the much later scheme of learning to be a nurse. He shrewdly avoided reference, however, to the evanescent nature of all these plans.

"I've decided that I don't want to leave Lakeport—not yet, anyway," said Lollie.

"No special reason, I suppose?"

Plimsoll ventured to be archly jocular.

"Well, yes," Lollie answered. "At least—well, I'd rather be here for a while."

She rose and moved deliberately into the hall.

"Going to bed?" Plimsoll called after her, a little hurt. Her laugh came floating back, and she followed it, a moment later, now wearing a bright, long-fringed shawl of lustrous Cuban silk.

"Not perceptibly! I'm going to Bishy Fanshawe's dance."

Her face had brightened. There was a dancing light in her eyes. Plimsoll smiled in sympathy.

"Who's taking you? Not young Hallowell, I hope?"

Lollie laughed. "Not," she said, "so you could notice it."

For some reason her face and tone awakened in her father a sudden, panic-stricken foreboding, a prescience of disaster almost instantly vindicated by events.

The leaded window casements chattered on their hinges; somewhere in the depths of the house a cup sang on its saucer. There was no need for Lollie to inform her father in whose society she was about to sally from his door. It was no mere motor siren that peremptorily summoned her from the driveway. Gilbert Dolliver had elected to honk, magnificently, through the more compelling agency of a bassoon.

CHAPTER SIX

THE chatter of the ancient car had subsided in the distance before Belden Plimsoll found his voice and tongue. The imperative need of using these recovered faculties drove him swiftly upstairs to Albertine.

"She's gone off to a dance with—with Gilbert Dolliver!"

"Of course," said Albertine. "That's why she called him up this morning. She couldn't help hearing what you said about him when you came in from your ride."

The tone was wearily matter-of-fact, the tone of one who states the obvious. Her husband was familiar with it and with Teenie's exasperating trick of using it in saying things that were not obvious at all.

"Don't you know," this manner seemed to ask, "that two and two make twelve?"

He shook his head.

"What are you talking about? I told you Lollie had gone out with Gilbert Dolliver and you come back with——"

"Oh," said Albertine impatiently, "it's all so perfectly simple! She wants to go to New York to study tap-dancing. She knows you won't hear of it. So, of course, she picks out the boy you despise most and pretends to be crazy about him, so that you'll do anything sooner than keep her here where she's bound to see him."

This was monstrous. He was appalled that Teenie, gentle, sweet-hearted Teenie, could impute to his

daughter the callous, calculated wickedness involved in this hypothesis. Women, he knew, were queerly hard in their judgments of each other, but Albertine—the child's mother, thus coldly accusing her daughter of base, heartless scheming——

"I never heard such nonsense!" he said warmly. "Lollie—" he paused. The walls of Albertine's room, except for one photograph of her husband, were decorated exclusively with pictures of Lollie—Lollie as a baby, Lollie at two and four and seven and ten, Lollie swimming, Lollie riding, Lollie in her first party dress, Lollie the dear, the loving, the merry-hearted perfect daughter of Belden Plimsoll's perfect fathering. It was this Lollie who was now incredibly slandered, slandered by the one person who, next to Belden Plimsoll himself, ought to know her best and love her most!

"I can hardly believe you really said such a hateful thing, Teenie! It would be mean to say it about any girl, but about your own daughter——!"

"All right," said Albertine wearily. She plumped her pillows. "Maybe you can think of a better way to explain why she's gone out with a boy she knows you can't stand, the very day she finds out how you feel about him. Maybe there's some easier way to account for her calling him up this noon—when she hasn't even spoke to him since they were children at dancing school!"

"You're wrong about that," Plimsoll told her quickly. "She talked to him last night."

Albertine started.

"Where? How do you know?"

Plimsoll hesitated. He had nobly determined to spare Albertine the unhappy news that Lollie hadn't dined and danced, last night, at the Country Club. It would only worry her, for one thing, and, for another,

it would encourage her in the quaint belief that she knew better, sometimes, than her husband. It was mere accident, of course, that her chance guess of last night had been accurate, and that Belden Plimsoll's logically reasoned opinion had been wrong.

"I just happened to hear," he said. "A man who came in to see me on business happened to say that he'd seen my daughter last night, and that young Dolliver was—was in the party."

Albertine's eyes went wide.

"But the Dollivers don't belong to the club."

Plimsoll sidestepped neatly.

"I guess a trifle like that wouldn't worry Gilbert much," he said, with a sudden realization of the truth of this purposely misleading statement. "Anyway, he was with Lollie and young Hallowell and from the way this friend of mine spoke they were on—on friendly terms. So you see you're wrong about——"

"You were talking about Gilbert last night," said Albertine. "She must have got the notion then. I know she hasn't seen anything of him since they were little, and she simply despised him then." She paused. "Did this man say they were at the club?"

Plimsoll was irritated again by the accidental accuracy of an utterly illogical suspicion. It would be a pity to encourage Albertine's faith in such random guesses.

"I don't think he did but it doesn't matter. The point is that this isn't any sudden acquaintance, and that you're wrong in thinking Lollie's deliberately gone out of her way to worry us. She's known Gilbert all her life; she happened to see him last night and——"

"And after listening to the pleasant names you called him at the top of your voice this morning, she

rang him on the telephone, as soon as she got up, and asked him to take her to this dance tonight!"

Albertine laughed drearily.

"What's the matter with you, Teenie?" Plimsoll was shocked. "I can hardly believe it's really you, the child's own mother!"

"That's just what's the matter with me!" Amazingly Albertine sobbed. "I'm her m-mother, and she—she's a p-perfect stranger to me! She hates me! She's so crazy to get away from me that she'll even go around with that horrible Gilbert Dolliver so as to s-stampede us into letting her go live somewhere else!"

"Now, now! You're just guessing again, Teenie! You're just trying to make yourself miserable, imagining a crazy thing like that." Plimsoll patted her shoulder. "She told me herself, just now, that she wouldn't think of leaving home. Forget it, Teenie. You're just tormenting yourself about nothing. You certainly can't seriously believe that Lollie's set her heart on being—" he laughed—"A female hoofer! Now, come! You certainly can't think she——"

"I don't think she cares a bit about being a dancer. It's just—just a p-pretext. Anything to get away from home! Away from us! That's all she wants. She—she doesn't *l-like* us. She doesn't!"

Plimsoll was appalled. Lollie—not love her mother and father? Lollie—he realized suddenly that Albertine wasn't herself; she wasn't well; she couldn't be, or of course she'd know better than to say such absurd things about her child—about, rather, Belden Plimsoll's child.

He mustn't forget that Lollie, after all, was cast in her father's mould. Naturally Albertine couldn't

understand her, couldn't follow her mental processes any more than she could follow Belden Plimsoll's. He thought, without disrespect, of distressed hens who mothered ducklings. Here, manifestly, was a situation that needed more mental force than poor Teenie could give—a problem to be faced and solved by clear, straight masculine intelligence, by a man's insight, a father's firm, loving, understanding authority.

"You go to sleep and stop worrying. Just leave the whole thing to me. I'll attend to it."

Albertine sniffed. It was, however, a sniff unmistakably drowsy. Plimsoll, smiling compassionately, tiptoed away, dimly envying, even as he pitied, Albertine's childlike ability to find instant refuge from her childlike troubles in deep, childlike sleep.

In his own room he dealt rationally with the situation, lying awake and reasoning, step by step, exactly as he would have worked out the answer to a problem in mechanics or finance.

Of course Albertine's theory was absurd. Lollie wouldn't dream of wanting to escape from a home like hers, parents like hers—for Albertine, if not her daughter's intellectual equal, perhaps, was still affectionate, generous, indulgent—a life, in short, wisely planned to make any girl completely happy. This New York notion was just one of Albertine's imaginary worries, based on some careless speech that Lollie had forgotten as soon as she had made it.

Lollie didn't want to go to New York, and therefore, of course, Albertine's hypothesis as to her motives for enduring the society of Gilbert Dolliver fell of its own weight. It was unthinkable, anyway. Lollie, loyal, loving, innocent little Lollie, cold-bloodedly scheming to torment such parents as hers! Kind-hearted Lollie,

plotting cruelty against the two people she loved, the two who loved her best!

It wasn't worthy of rebuttal, that ridiculous slander.

Lollie had some other reason for pretending—of course she was pretending—to be interested in Gilbert Dolliver. And this reason, now that Belden Plimsoll's mind determined upon discovering it, had a dismal chance of remaining unrevealed. Almost at once, indeed, Plimsoll knew what it was.

Pity, of course. Lollie was the softest-hearted child alive, and even a hard-boiled adult could be sorry for Gilbert Dolliver. Plimsoll himself was sorry for him, felt a stab of generous anger toward Herbert Dolliver for allowing Pansy to bring up Gilbert as she pleased.

He remembered those long spiral curls that had brushed Gilbert's lace-collared shoulders when the son of right-minded parents would have been playing football; he thought, with a pang of unwilling compassion, of a ghastly affair to which Albertine had insisted on his going—The Marriage of the Mites. Even now Plimsoll winced at the memory of that happily alliterative title; he felt again a reluctant sympathy for the chief victim of that outrage, a boy in powdered curls and white silk knee-breeches who had played the bridegroom's rôle to a cooing chorus of applause from ladies such as Mrs. Homer Hoffmeister and Miss Virgie May McNinch.

Pity. This explained everything. How else could a child blest with parents such as Lollie's regard the son of Pansy Dolliver? Plimsoll's throat tightened lovingly. Warm-hearted little Lollie, hearing Gilbert condemned by her father; a witness of Marvin Hallowell's cruel in-rubbing of that Buddha business; again,

next morning, listening to what Belden Plimsoll had said in anger about the fellow! Of course she had been moved to pity. That was all.

Plimsoll had drifted comfortably near to sleep when, abruptly, he sat up, wide awake and horror-stricken.

He had just remembered what pity was akin to!

CHAPTER SEVEN

GRAVELY preoccupied with gears that only intimacy and finesse could persuade to mesh, Gilbert Dolliver made no remark to the lady beside him until, cajoled at last into high speed, the car jogged down the driveway with only muffled hiccoughs and the squeaks and rattles normal to its better moments.

It was now apparent that laughter possessed Miss Plimsoll. Compactly swathed in the Cuban shawl, her slim body surrendered itself to mirth and her bubbling laugh was audible above the plaintive grumble of the car. Gilbert spoke with a plain hint of offense.

"What's the joke?"

Except for a slight wobble Lollie's creamy voice submitted to control.

"What—what gave you that perfectly divine idea of—of tooting for me on your bassoon?"

"I don't see what's so funny about that. It's kind of late and I didn't want to disturb anybody. Lots of people get sore if you honk—old people."

"That's so," Lollie admitted. "My—my father's like that." She allowed a bubble of mirth to escape her. "I wish you'd always bring your bassoon when you come for me and p-play on it instead of honking. It—it's so much nicer!"

"I probably won't be coming for you again," said Gilbert. "I didn't mind helping you out tonight, as long as you were up against it for some way to get to this dance, but I'm apt to be kind of busy, after this, so you better not count on——"

"Oh!" Lollie's voice was still like cream, but like cream, now, that has been iced. "I'm frightfully sorry if I've put you to any trouble!"

"Well, it's no trouble tonight," said Gilbert. "Or not much, anyway. But I probably wouldn't be able to do it again, and I wouldn't feel right, either, about getting you or any girl mixed up in what I'm up against right now. Maybe there isn't much danger, but——"

"Danger?" Lollie spoke sharply. "Gilbert Dolliver! What have you been doing now?"

"That's what I've been trying to think." He twisted his head to glance back at the headlamps of a car that seemed strangely contented with the stately twenty-mile amble of the prewar chariot. "I can't think of any reason why anybody'd put detectives on my tracks."

Lollie started. She twisted to look back.

"Detectives! How do you know they're detectives? And what makes you think they're following you?"

"Oh, I know, all right. That one's been after me all day. I didn't notice till he'd chased me around for quite awhile but I remembered seeing him waiting outside the house when I first came out, and then I made sure he was really trailing me."

He related the steps by which he had verified his suspicions.

"If you don't believe it, you just watch what happens now."

He turned into a crossroad, circled the square, faithfully pursued by the attending lamps.

"You're right—he *is* following us!" Lollie laughed delightedly. "How perfectly marvelous!" She laughed again.

"It might not be so funny," Gilbert objected. "It

might be pretty serious. I'll feel a lot better when I get you over to the Fanshawes'. You can get somebody else to drive you home easy enough."

"Do you think I'm going to waste my time on a stupid old *dance,* when I've got a chance to be shadowed by a real detective? Be your age!"

"It's no game for girls," said Gilbert. "Detectives cost real money and whoever puts up the coin for keeping 'em after me isn't doing it for fun. No, sir—I've got enough on my mind right now without having to worry about any girl! You're going to hop right out of this car as soon as we get to Bishy's and that's that."

"Oh, that's that, is it?" The Belden chin lifted.

"Yeh, that's that." Gilbert spoke placidly. There was a brief silence during which Miss Plimsoll seemed to meditate.

"Please, Gilly." The Cuban shawl now touched Gilbert's shoulder lightly.

"Never mind the sex appeal, either," said Gilbert, grossly. "If any."

"Oh, thank you!" The shawl pointedly ceased to touch the sleeve of the dinner jacket, and Lollie's voice was now, definitely, an ice-cream voice.

"You're welcome," said Gilbert cheerfully. He turned his head for another backward glance. The Cuban shawl, as if warring emotions grappled fiercely within it, quivered slightly.

"Am I really as wet as that? Do you honestly mean I haven't got any It at all?"

Except for an effect of strain it was the tone of purely scientific inquiry, asking information and promising to take no offense. Gilbert accepted it at face value.

"Well, I've only got one vote. You seem to go over with the adding-machine boys, and maybe they don't need their jobs. But I don't need one—not that bad, anyway."

"Of course you don't," said Lollie sweetly. "Why should you work, when your mother's perfectly willing to support you as long as you'll stand for her going round telling everybody you're Buddha?"

The old car stood still, shaking as if with outraged dignity.

"Get out," said Gilbert, "and walk."

With her hand on the latch, Lollie paused.

"I apologize for that," she said.

"Go on. Get out."

Instead, however, Lollie suddenly curled herself into a limp, miserable bundle of grief, sobbing in the farthest corner of the seat.

"Oh, I'm so hateful! Saying a thing like that when I ought to be the last person on earth to bub-blame anybody for what their parents do! I'm perfectly willing to walk home—I ought to have to crawl on my knees—but I didn't mean it, Gilbert. I was just so miserable I——"

"Aw, don't do that! I didn't mean to make you cry, Lollie."

Behind them, its speed dwindling, the other car approached. Hurriedly Gilbert engaged the ancient gears.

"Forget it, Lollie. I didn't know—I thought you were just taking me for a ride."

Lollie sat up in her corner, her hands still covering her face but her sobbings now under a measure of control.

"I didn't mean it. But when you said that about the

adding-machine boys—" again, passionately, she wept. Gilbert reached out awkwardly to pat her shoulder.

"I was just—aw, say, Lollie!"

"If you want to murder anybody who calls you—calls you *that*—how do you suppose I feel when somebody talks about those perfectly repulsive boys from the office? You ought to know how it feels to be teased for what your—for what other people do! How do you suppose I feel when my father comes home with his perfectly horrible little go-getters and sits there just—just sicking them on me? He had four new ones there tonight—all simply repulsive and——"

"I never knew you felt like this about it," said Gilbert. "I always thought you liked having them."

"You don't like it when people call you—well, you know what I mean! You can stand up and slap 'em down, though! And all I can do is look pleasant. I'm nothing but a damn girl! I can't even beat it out of here. But I'm going to! I'm going to live my own life if it kills me! I'm going to New York and learn tap-dancing and——"

"New York!" Pleased astonishment, as at a notable coincidence, was in Gilbert's voice. "Well, what do you know about that? That's the very place I'm going. I was down at the station this afternoon to see about a ticket!"

"No! Not really!" Lollie sat up straight and there was in her outcry an impassioned protest, the menace of imminent, reviving grief.

"Not right away," said Gilbert hurriedly. "I wouldn't want to go now."

"Oh!" A certain complacency was present in the relieved monosyllable.

"No," said Gilbert. "I won't go for a while, anyway."

"Promise? No fooling?"

"Promise?" Gilbert sounded bewildered by the word. "What for? You think I'm going to pass up a chance to be shadowed?"

Lollie did not immediately reply. Again, as if embattled emotions wrestled within it, the Cuban shawl quivered slightly.

"No," she said. "Of course you wouldn't want to do that." She looked back. Suddenly she giggled. "Let's give him something nice to detect, Gilbert."

Twice Gilbert coughed, the sound evincing, somehow, his high approval of the proposal.

"Yeh, let's. But what?"

As Lollie meditated briefly, her resemblance to her father would have delighted Belden Plimsoll's heart.

"We better stop somewhere and let him catch up with us."

"He won't. He keeps back when I slow down."

"We'll go in some place. He'll probably come in too, so as to watch us and hear what we're saying, and we can give him a lovely earful!" Her laugh bubbled. "You know—mystery stuff, Gilbert. You just look wise and say yes and leave it to me. I'll fix him!"

"But——"

"Here's a good place. Pull in."

Gilbert stopped before a filling station and refreshment stand.

"We'll go in and eat and I'll bet you anything he comes in after us," said Lollie, descending. "You'll see."

Gilbert followed her, pausing only to retrieve his bassoon from the back seat. Behind his counter the

proprietor of the lunch stand, a dejected man in a dirty apron, bent a baleful eye upon the instrument.

"You can't play that thing in here," he announced.

"Wasn't going to." Gilbert coughed. "I just brought it in so it wouldn't be stolen out of my car. Two dogs."

"Huh!" The dismal man, turning to his griddle, emitted a sardonic laugh. "Who'd steal a bassoon?"

"Why not?" demanded Gilbert. "Why wouldn't anybody steal one if he had a good chance?"

Again the man laughed dismally.

"You go ask my father-in-law," he said.

"Why?" Lollie, too, was curious, although her attention was chiefly fixed on the reflection, in the coffee-boiler, of the door behind her, beyond which a small car, in the process of parking beside Gilbert's, was now visible.

"Ask him what his bassoon's done for him, that's all!" said the gloomy man. "Broke up his home, that's all, and busted him clean out of business, so he's nothin' but a night watchman over to the old piano works! That's all one of them things done to my father-in-law."

"How," Gilbert asked, "how'd a bassoon do all that to anybody?"

"You'll find out." The proprietor nodded darkly. "You know how to play that thing yet, or you just learning?"

"Well, I only got it yesterday," Gilbert admitted, "but I can sort of——"

A passionate movement of a shirt-sleeved arm arrested him on the point of demonstration.

"Not in here! You want to play that thing, you go over to the piano works and do it, same as my father-in-law. Nobody can hear it over there except

the old man, and he can stand it. He's got the bug himself."

He placed cloven rolls, each enclosing a frankfurter, on paper plates before them, wiped his hands on his apron and punched his cash register.

"A good home," he said with bitterness, "and a nice payin' undertakin' business and a gang of good friends—that's all it's cost my wife's old man to learn that thing good enough so's he can play Sailor Beware! That's all!"

Gilbert, visibly on the point of further inquiry, was admonished by a movement of Lollie's elbow. In the coffee boiler the entry of a thick, blue-chinned man in a discouraged felt hat was distortedly reflected. He approached the counter and commanded coffee. Lollie spoke in a tone, lowered and apprehensive, that was still clearly audible.

"We're safe so far," she said. She glanced over her shoulder. Gilbert took his cue.

"Yeh. Looks like a clean getaway, after all."

The blue-chinned man sipped his coffee, betraying no sign of interest.

"Maybe this man could tell us," said Lollie.

Gilbert fumbled this time. His right eyebrow arched in blank inquiry and he answered only with his habitual, brief cough. Lollie leaned over the counter.

"Maybe," she whispered, "maybe you can tell us how to get to the nearest minister's?"

The blue-chinned man spilled coffee down his sleeve. The proprietor rolled a melancholy, compassionate eye toward Lollie.

"Better think it over, sister," he urged. "The world's crowded with guys that never caught the bassoon bug."

"Say—" Gilbert's startled protest got no farther. Lollie's elbow stabbed him commandingly.

"Never mind about that," she said. "Where's the nearest min——"

"If you're bound to tie yourself up to that kind of grief, you might as well go over to the piano works and give my wife's old man your business. He's still justice of the peace and I wouldn't put it past him to marry a bassoon player free!"

"Where's this piano factory?" Lollie was briskly businesslike. Belden Plimsoll himself could not have spoken more straightly to the point. The blue-chinned man set down his coffee mug and went swiftly out.

"Say—" Gilbert began once more.

"Sh-h! Where's this factory?"

The proprietor gave morose directions. Her hand on Gilbert's sleeve, Lollie led the way to the door and to the car. The blue-chinned man had not yet started his own but as Gilbert drove away the sound of a starter arose behind them, and the yellow eyes of headlights resumed their dogged watchfulness.

"What's the idea?" Gilbert was now suffered to voice his grievance. "Why'd you want to pull off a crazy line like that? That bird'll think we're going to get married!"

His manner suggested with rather too much heat the fantastic absurdity of this idea, and there was again a slightly strained effect in Lollie's laugh.

"That's just what we want, isn't it?"

"What? Get married? To you?"

Once more under provocation in the matter of tone Lollie successfully ruled her spirit.

"Hardly, darling! You're quite safe with me. Honestly. But don't you see that unless this detective puts it into their heads nobody could possibly have any

such wild notion about us? And if anybody shows any sign of thinking that we're going to elope, we know who's behind your little friend back yonder, don't we? Well, then?"

"That's right." Gilbert coughed admiringly. "You're not so dumb as I thought."

"I have my moments," said Lollie. "You turn left here."

"What's the sense of trying to find this factory as long as we're just making a bluff?" Gilbert took, however, the left-hand road.

"Because we want to sell the idea as thoroughly as possible to the detective, don't we? If we don't seem interested enough to look up this justice of the peace, he may think we were just joshing or something."

"Yeh. But what do we say when we get there? What are we going to tell the watchman?"

Lollie sighed. "Still afraid I'm going to stage a shot-gun marriage on you? Don't worry. It wouldn't be legal without some witnesses and we'd have to get a license, too, so you're quite safe."

"Louder and funnier," said Gilbert. "What I mean is——"

"I know what you mean, darling. We go in and ask the night watchman about giving you some lessons on your bassoon. Fair enough?"

The old car quickened its pace.

"You certainly aren't so dumb, Lollie!" Gilbert coughed. "I was wondering how I'd get a chance to learn how to play. This might be the answer." He thought it over. "I could come out here every night and——"

"Sh-h! Listen!"

Above the grumble of the weary car, below it,

rather, a mutter as of a melancholy giant, prisoned far underground, came through the night, took form.

. . . hearts are asleep in the deep
So bee-
ware! Be—
wa-aware!

Again, like a patient horse under sudden spur, the ancient car leaped onward.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SLEEP, which had already mended for Belden Plimsoll the ravelled sleeve of last night's care, still profoundly engulfed his daughter.

Regarding her from the doorway of her room, Plimsoll pleaded guilty to the harsh indictments of his conscience. He was ashamed of himself; mentally he apologized to Lollie for the unworthy doubts of her that had been suffered to find standing room in her father's mind.

Here was another commonplace miracle in process, a miracle so familiar that Plimsoll did not even recognize its existence. Asleep, curled like a kitten into a round, compact little molecule of artless comfort, Lollie was herself again—the real Lollie that Plimsoll knew and loved—and owned.

His daughter. His. Plimsoll's mental emphasis was heavy on the possessive pronoun. This quality of the real Lollie was more important, more endearing and disarming than any of the other traits that distinguished Belden Plimsoll's actual daughter from the changeling stranger who sometimes masqueraded in her outward seeming.

This lovely child, fast asleep in her funny little nest of pillows, her lips parted in a faint, contented smile, her hair tumbling over her flushed cheek, was everything that a perfect daughter ought to be—honest and loyal and loving and clever and merry-hearted and generous and kind, but, best of all, she was *his*.

This was all, really, that mattered to Belden Plim-

soll—this recovery of his certainty of ownership. Once he could know surely that Lollie was *his,* everything else followed. The intolerable doubt that beset him sometimes, when the counterfeit Lollie smoked and sprawled and answered him with cool, flippant irreverence, was always this—a cold, heart-sickening suspicion that his title deed to the only one of his possessions that was wholly vital to him might not be absolutely clear and cloudless.

And it was this gray ghost that was laid for him by these morning glimpses past the edge of Lollie's door. It was this fear that dissolved and lifted as he closed the door softly and turned away; its dissipation was enough, as always, to make Belden Plimsoll a happy man, whose morning was at seven and with whose world all was very well indeed.

He had heroically compelled himself to resume his perilous adventurings on the high, unstable summit of the venerable horse, and there was upon him, as he changed and bathed and dressed, the comfortable knowledge of duty well performed, of dangers bravely faced and safely passed. He sang softly in his shower; he whistled as he knotted his tie; he chuckled, seating himself at his breakfast, over the absurd fancies that had been suffered to trouble him last night.

He could even take a philosophically pitying attitude toward Gilbert Dolliver, this morning, could think of him just as Lollie must think of him, could clearly and sympathetically understand, now, why Lollie had chosen, last night, to be kind to the poor fellow.

Anybody, Plimsoll thought, would be sorry for Gilbert; all normal people were sorry for subnormal ones, for imbeciles and cripples and even for criminals. It had been altogether in character for warm-hearted, impulsive, generous little Lollie, to go out of her way,

yesterday, to be kind to Pansy Dolliver's unlucky son, exactly as she might have befriended a stray, hungry kitten or dropped a coin, with word of comfort, in a blind man's cup.

And her own father had so misinterpreted that kindness as to be afraid that—Plimsoll refused to complete the thought. He hadn't been as wildly, unjustly wrong, he told himself, as Albertine. There was this, at least, to be said for his defense. He'd only feared that Lollie might be too kind, too compassionate; he hadn't charged her, like Albertine, with deliberate, cold-blooded cruelty and base deceit!

He forgave Albertine, however. Again, indulgently, he thought of hens who mothered ducklings. Albertine just didn't understand Lollie. She wasn't to blame for this. For that matter she didn't understand, even dimly, her own largely reflexive mental processes, and as for understanding Belden Plimsoll—he laughed as he went out to his waiting car.

Everything was all right.

Everything continued to be all right until, striding briskly and masterfully through the reception room, he found Thomas Noonan in waiting and read, in the haggardness and unshaven blueness of that gentleman's dished countenance, sure tidings that certain things were very, very wrong.

CHAPTER NINE

THE habit of relentless self-government was deeply fixed on Belden Plimsoll. With no outward sign of emotion he gave ear to Noonan's faithful history of yesterday. And with only impassive grimness he received the information that his daughter, instead of attending Mrs. Fanshawe's dance, had permitted Gilbert Dolliver to escort her on an expedition tactlessly described by Noonan as a joy ride. Stoically he heard Noonan's version of a brief halt at the roadside, during which Noonan had been able to approach, unnoticed, near enough to observe a passage between the two young people for which the detective, after hesitating, found no happier word than petting.

"Nothing rough, y'understand," Mr. Noonan made haste to add. "He was just kind of pawing her shoulder when I come up behind 'em and I guess my lights—well, anyway, he cut it out and drove ahead."

Plimsoll nodded. He could control his face but he had no confidence in his voice. It was only when Noonan, visibly reluctant and condoling, narrated the conversation he had overheard in the wayside lunch room that Plimsoll's appalled reflexes broke their leash. He stood up. The voice in which he echoed Noonan's word was a frog's croak.

"Minister! They—they didn't——"

Noonan's hand moved sidewise and downward in a reassuring gesture.

"With me right there? Not a chance! I got a daughter of my own, Mr. Plimsoll, and I wouldn't

stand back and leave any girl tie herself up to bad news like Gilly Dolliver if I had to pull my gun to stop her!"

So low had Belden Plimsoll fallen that he could be passionately glad to hear that his daughter hadn't actually married Gilbert Dolliver—as yet! He listened with regained composure to the tale of the journey to the piano factory.

"It's the plant that went broke four-five years back," Noonan explained. "It's over back of Egandale, by the B. L. & P. tracks."

"I know," said Plimsoll shortly. "I own it."

Noonan stared. "You own it? Why, I thought——"

"I don't advertise it when I'm stung, but it happens sometimes." Plimsoll shrugged his shoulders. By contrast to his present troubles the memory of that flyer in the piano business seemed almost pleasant. "Go on."

"Well, soon's I heard that the night watchman was a justice of the peace I was worried, so I tailed 'em close and got there pretty near as soon as they did, but I guess they either lost their nerve or else the watchman told 'em there was nothing doing without a coupla witnesses and a license, because there wasn't any talk about getting married while I was listening in. It seems this night watchman's another bassoon bug, the same as Gilly, and they was talking about that all the time, and playing. The watchman can play pretty good. He's going to give Gilly lessons, so when he goes to New York he can get a job playing in some night club."

Plimsoll looked up quickly. "He's going to New York too, is he?"

"Yeh. He was down at the station in the afternoon,

talking to Fred Driscoll in the ticket office about trains and fares and he said something to Fred about getting a job in a night club down there."

"What happened after they left the piano works?" Plimsoll's mind filed for future reference the information as to Gilbert's New York project.

"Nothing only some more joy-riding round. They got back to your place around two and Gilly went home from there. But I figured I better get down here early and put you wise, Mr. Plimsoll. I sure hated to tell you. I got a daughter of my own, and I know how I'd feel if my Eileen——"

"It—it doesn't mean anything," said Plimsoll. His glance moved to Lollie's photograph and found there a sudden grateful confirmation of a statement begun more in hope than with conviction. It became absurd to think that Lollie had been in earnest. Noonan had happened to overhear some boy-and-girl joke and taken it seriously, as he would have been justified, of course, in taking it if it had involved his daughter, or any man's daughter except Belden Plimsoll's.

Of course! The photograph, the vivid memory of Lollie's sleeping, flushed face against her thumped pillows, Plimsoll's own sure knowledge of her—all these things, arrayed against Noonan's inferences from fragmentary eavesdroppings, swiftly enlightened Plimsoll as to the truth.

Pity, to begin with, as he had realized last night, and afterwards nothing but a harmless bit of skylarking. That was all.

"You were right to tell me, Noonan," he said kindly. "But of course you understand that there's nothing serious about all this." He laughed. "Why, if I'd seen my daughter before I left the house this morning she'd probably have told me all about it herself and

we'd have had a good laugh together. She'll tell me tonight. We're pretty good friends—more like friends than most fathers and daughters. We're——"

"Just a coupla good pals," said Noonan, nodding. "That's the right dope, all right. That's how I am with Eileen. Just a coupla buddies." He rose. "Long as you feel there's nothing to it, will I keep on tailing Gilly?"

Plimsoll hesitated. There wasn't anything to it, of course. He knew Lollie. He didn't need any red-necked ex-detective to tell him about her. And yet—joy ride . . . petting . . . ministers and justices of the peace. . . .

"Oh, you might as well watch him a while longer," he decided. Noonan exhibited both relief and regret. His expression prompted Plimsoll to inquiry.

"Well, there's two ways to look at it," said Noonan. "Tailing these lads from the plant is nice, easy work and early hours but it ain't much sport. Gilly Dolliver's more like a real job, what I mean—it's kind of interesting to tail him, but he don't know when to hit the horsefeathers and he goes places where it's quite a trick to follow him without leaving him get wise. Like that piano works last night."

"You don't think they—he suspected that you were following?"

Dimly Plimsoll was displeased by the doubt. Noonan, hurt, set it emphatically at rest.

"Who? Me? Why, say—" his hand performed, palm downward, a circular movement, pivoting in his wrist—"why, say, I've tailed tough babies with eyes in their back hair. I hope to say I can handle a coupla kids that are so goofy about each other they don't know they got any comp'ny on earth! Why—" he stopped, gulped, laughed uneasily. "I didn't mean that,

Mr. Plimsoll. Of course, jus' 's you say, there's nothing to this business only some kids' fooling. But don't you worry a minute about them catching on to me. Why, I could ride right in the car with 'em and they wouldn't spot me!"

Plimsoll nodded dismissingly and Noonan took his departure with visible alacrity. His incautious words, however, lingered long after he had gone.

Goofy about each other. Goofy. Somehow the word itself carried, against Plimsoll's resolute disbelief, an irresistible conviction. If Noonan had said that Lollie was infatuated with Gilbert, in love with him, her father could have dealt more competently with the statement, but . . . goofy! Plimsoll didn't know its exact significance but the mere sound was enough. Goofy! His daughter, goofy about Gilbert Dolliver!

Not even the photograph provided, now, a satisfying reassurance. The girl in the gold frame, softly smiling at her father, looked, suddenly, like a girl who could be made the victim of her own warm heart and ready sympathy and trustful faith in human goodness. She looked capable, actually, of goofiness!

Belden Plimsoll's mastery of men and circumstance was founded solidly upon the faculty, common to builders and leaders and rulers, of thinking straight and swiftly in the face of sudden crisis, thinking faster and more surely than even he could think in time of peace and leisure.

This faculty served him now. Within ten seconds after the closing of the office door on Noonan's departing rubber heels, Plimsoll had come to the decision that Gilbert Dolliver's absence from Lakeport, an absence immediate and, if humanly possible, permanent, was essential to Belden Plimsoll's peace of mind. Within ten more he had arrived at several definite

conclusions as to the most feasible and effective means of accomplishing this absence. And within ten minutes he was on his way to interview Mr. Archibald McFetridge, Vice President and Trust Officer of the Third National Bank.

Mr. McFetridge received him with incautious cordiality, lowering his guard in the presence of a caller who could be trusted not to ask for anything a banker would not gladly grant. His lean face lost some of its angles; a rat-trap mouth experimented with the unaccustomed processes of smiling. To Belden V. Plimsoll, Mr. McFetridge even extended the unwary greeting reserved for the president and directors of the bank itself.

"What can I do for you?"

He spoke as if, aware that there was nothing whatever that he could do for Belden Plimsoll, he wished sincerely that this were not the case. And his jaw sagged blankly at Plimsoll's answer.

"Plenty!"

Plimsoll sat. Grimly amused, he watched a flitting parade of startled suspicions flicker across McFetridge's face, a face automatically rearranging itself in the firmly negative angles of its habit. The Intercontinental in a hole. . . . Plimsoll himself caught on the wrong side of the market. . . .

"You're trustee under Al Dolliver's will."

McFetridge's countenance underwent another sudden alteration. It ceased instantly to be the face of one set high in judgment and command. It became the face of common, weak humanity, beset by human care and trial. The squareness of its angles pinched into concern and alarm. It wore, now, the look of the hunted and helpless.

"I am," said McFetridge. He sent a quick, wary

glance over his shoulder. "A sad thing, Al's dying so young. Very sad."

"I hear," said Plimsoll, "that you won't let go of enough of Al's money to send his wife and boy to India. I hear you don't realize who the boy really is."

McFetridge sighed, the sigh of unhappiness slightly eased by company.

"So she's been at you, too, eh?"

"Mac, you've got to let her have the money." Plimsoll leaned forward. McFetridge straightened angrily.

"You come in here on a busy morning to waste my time on such talk? If you've no better use for business hours, I have! You know better."

"You're going to let her have the money," Plimsoll repeated. "It'll be my money, but nobody'll know it except you and me."

Again, briefly, McFetridge's jaw sagged. Again, with less amusement, Plimsoll watched the flicker of swift thoughts across the angled face. The eyes narrowed to comprehension. There was, also, regret and wistfulness in the look, as if McFetridge abandoned with reluctance a shining vision of the long, untroubled months required for a pilgrimage to Indian shrines and a course in meditation under the uncle of Lal Chundra Dass.

"I couldn't do it," he said. "I'd like to, but it wouldn't do. If I let her think she could talk money out of me—no. It's bad enough as it is."

"You've got to do this for me, Mac! Got to, I tell you! It's important."

"No," said McFetridge. Plimsoll, a connoisseur in the matter of negations, recognized this one as a "No" of utter finality. His face seemed to stir compassion in McFetridge.

"There's no need of it, either," he said. "I'll tell

you something, B. V. It's no business of mine to guess why you're so eager to spend your money on sending Pansy Dolliver on a long trip——"

"Not Pansy," said Plimsoll hastily. "It's the pup I'm thinking about."

He saw McFetridge seek and find a hypothesis to account for this confessed ambition, and regretted the incautious speech. It would have been better to let McFetridge suspect him of an uncured weakness for Pansy than to take him into the secret of his belittling anxieties concerning Lollie. McFetridge, however, was in some degree bound by the confessional seal of all high, sacred callings. He wouldn't talk, couldn't.

"I see. And I don't wonder. The only son of his mother and she a widow! Well, here's news for you. You may see the last of the young man pretty soon without having to build him a golden bridge to leave by. I doubt if he'll stay here when he has money enough to get away, and he'll have forty thousand odd on the twelfth of next month."

Plimsoll's shoulders jerked.

"He'll be twenty-three," said McFetridge, "and under the terms of the trust he'll have a third of the estate outright. I doubt if he'll stay here to spend it."

Plimsoll's wits cleared and quickened in the face of this fresh menace.

"It's queer," he said slowly, "that his mother didn't say anything about that when she was trying to persuade me to make you let go of——"

"She doesn't know it," said McFetridge. "She must have known it when Al died, but she'd sooner think it was all hers and you know Pansy—she's apt to think what she wants to think."

"How about the boy himself? Does he know?"

"I don't think he does. If he did, by what I've seen

of him, he'd have been in here long ago trying to wheedle an advance out of me." McFetridge spoke in a tone that suggested regret, as if it would have given him a keen and special pleasure to refuse such a request. "I'll have to tell him, of course, on the twelfth, but I see no reason for saying anything before then." He sighed. "Forty thousand! I hate to think what he'll do with it!"

So, more desperately, did Belden Plimsoll hate to think. Gilbert Dolliver with empty pockets, depending on what he could beg and wheedle out of Pansy, was formidable enough to have moved Belden Plimsoll to definite measures of defense, but Gilbert Dolliver, with forty thousand dollars burning in his pockets. . . .

And Noonan, whose trade, after all, was to observe, had chosen to describe the state of Gilbert's emotions —and Lollie's—as goofy!

"All right." Plimsoll stood up, his shoulders square.

"Much obliged for telling me, Mac. And if you'll wait till you have to before you tell——"

"No fear," said McFetridge. "I'll wait!"

He spoke with feeling, and this much of comfort Plimsoll was able to carry away. He had almost three weeks. On the sidewalk he signaled to a passing taxi with the peremptory finger of a field marshal, and his mental attitude, as he rode uptown, was as militant, the mind of a commander resolved upon swift, offensive warfare in the territory of the foe.

Repulse, however, met him at the Dolliver front door.

"She med'tatin'."

Manifestly, to the bandanna-capped colored woman this statement was complete and final. Plimsoll was

never at his best with persons of African descent; for some reason these responded less willingly to his authoritative manner than people of his own race, and some of them, like Zenia, seemed to find a certain pleasure in a display of defiance.

"Tell her Mr. Plimsoll's here," he said sharply. "She'll see me."

"She ain't go' see nobody till she dressed," said Zenia, unmoved, "an' she ain't goin' *git* dressed till she th'oo med'tatin' an' she ain' go git th'oo med'tatin' till ha' pass twelve."

She made, now, as if to close the door upon debate already closed. Plimsoll arrested the movement with a lift of his hand.

"I'll see her son, then," he said. Zenia laughed.

"He ain' go' wake up till noon, nohow!"

"He'll wake up if you tell him I'm down here," snapped Plimsoll. "Go and tell him. I'll wait."

He made almost forcible entry into the hallway. Zenia, after a brief irresolution, climbed stairs that groaned faintly under her ascent. Her thumping knuckles, the sound of her voice, descended.

"You wake up, Gilbutt, you hea' *me?"* A pause, vague mutterings in a voice recognizable as that of Gilbert, unwillingly submitting to the burden of consciousness. "Man say he name Simspon say you got to come down see him." More murmurs. "Li'l man. Talk kine uh biggy."

Plimsoll scowled. Neither adjective fitted him. Five feet eight inches certainly couldn't be called little, and there had been nothing biggy in his natural display of an authority based solidly on fact. He looked up at the sound of padding footsteps and met the sleepy gaze of Gilbert, who leaned over the stair rail.

"Oh!" Gilbert coughed. "Good-morning, sir." He coughed again.

"Hello, Gilbert." Plimsoll forced himself to a heartiness wholly insincere. The respectful affability of Gilbert, the unjustified pinkness of his morning face, the embarrassed deference of his cough, all aggravated Plimsoll's hostility. Nobody who had been up most of the night had any right to look so healthy; nobody, waking at ten in the morning, had any license to seem unashamed.

"I came to see your mother, but the maid tells me she doesn't appear till noon, so I thought I might as well have a talk with you as long as I was here. I'm sorry to disturb you."

"Oh, that's all right, sir." Gilbert accepted the apology without suspecting it, apparently, of irony. "If you'll wait a minute I'll get dressed."

"Oh, never mind that. Come down as you are."

Plimsoll suspected that even the simple processes of self-arrayal might take this young man a good many dawdling, inefficient minutes, and he intuitively sought the advantage, also, that a decent business suit must enjoy over pajamas and dressing gown and heelless slippers. Gilbert coughed and descended.

"I wanted to talk to you about a job," said Plimsoll. "I've got an opening just now that ought to suit you right down to the ground, and I thought you might have changed your mind since the last time we talked it over."

"I'd certainly like——" Gilbert's apparent interest faded quickly, as if, Plimsoll thought, the effort of pretending was too much like work! "I couldn't get the time, I'm afraid, sir." He coughed. "It's mighty kind of you to think of it."

"Not—not at all," said Plimsoll, putting down re-

bellion with stern hand. "This job needs somebody of just your—your type. I—I'm not just offering it to you—I'm asking you to——" he swallowed—"to consider it, as—as a favor to me."

Again, briefly, Gilbert's look brightened to a show of interest, and again the glow faded.

"I'm sorry, sir, but——"

"Wait a minute. You'd better let me tell you what it is anyway. It's—it's a sort of traveling commission. You'd spend most of your time on steamers. All you'd have to do would be to drop in a while at each of our foreign offices and just write me a letter telling me what you saw. Of course you'd have all your expenses and a good salary on top of them."

Gilbert shook his head with decision. "I'm sorry, sir. I'd certainly like to help you out, but I couldn't—well, you see, I couldn't leave home right now."

"Why not?" Plimsoll's bruskness was the sharper for the telltale heightening of Gilbert's naturally high color, for the perceptible increase in his embarrassed diffidence.

"Well——" Gilbert coughed—"well, I couldn't. I've got—well, I've got some things to tend to right here that I couldn't leave. Even if I wanted to."

Dismally Noonan's wretched adjective echoed in Belden Plimsoll's mind. Goofy! Noonan had been accurate as to Gilbert, at least. Goofy was indubitably the word.

"I see. You have some—some affairs here that you wouldn't leave even to get the kind of a job I'm offering you. Is that it?"

Gilbert's cough seemed to apologize.

"Yes, sir. That's right."

Plimsoll hesitated. "But I heard that you were thinking of leaving town," he ventured. "That's why

I—why I thought you might be interested in this position of mine. Somebody told me you were going to New York or some such place."

Even in distress of mind, Plimsoll's deep-rooted habit compelled him to speak of New York as merely one of the cities that were not Lakeport.

Gilbert's eye rolled apprehensively upward.

"Well, I did think some about it, but that was before I found out——" he paused to cough—"well, I changed my mind."

Plimsoll winced. It was necessary, however, to know the worst. He persevered.

"Something that happened since yesterday noon makes you want to stay here. Is that it?"

"Yes, sir."

"You don't care to tell me what it was? I—I might be able to help you."

Unmistakably, now, Gilbert flushed. "No, sir. I couldn't very well talk about it, not right now, anyway."

"All right." Plimsoll straightened and his voice was curt. "Tell your mother, please, that I have some news for her that I think she'd like to hear."

"Yes, sir. I'll tell her."

Gilbert opened the door and Plimsoll, erect and outwardly undaunted, marched out to the waiting cab.

It was clear to him that Noonan had selected the right adjective as to Gilbert. It was also evident that Gilbert fatuously believed that the word might justly be applied to Lollie. He might, however, be deceived on this point. It remained for Plimsoll to find out, for certain, whether his daughter, too, was goofy.

CHAPTER TEN

ALTHOUGH the telephone bell had interrupted him in the midst of a highly unvegetarian breakfast, Gilbert's manner, evincing no enthusiasm, was at least passively acquiescent.

Under question he admitted that his health was good and denied that there was anything new. To the inquiry as to when Lollie might expect him to call for her this evening he returned the blunt answer that he wasn't going to call for her at all.

The indraught of Miss Plimsoll's breath was audible over the wire and she began, unmistakably, an angry rejoinder which she did not complete. Instead, ignominiously, she stooped to entreaty, entreaty quivering on the brink of tears.

"Oh, please, Gilbert! Please!"

Gilbert coughed unhappily.

"Oh, well——"

There was a faint sound behind him. He twisted to receive the soft reproach of his mother's misty smile, to observe the terrifying movement of her left hand toward her heart.

"I can't talk to you now——" he said hurriedly to the transmitter. "I——"

"Baby!" Mrs. Dolliver's voice was ardent with fond pain. "You're talking to some *girl!*"

"Now, mama——" Gilbert omitted either to ring off or to cover the transmitter.

"After all the Swami told you! After you promised!"

"I can't help it if they call me up, can I? You think I *want* to talk to 'em?"

Under unjust suspicion Gilbert permitted himself to speak with unfilial heat. His mother's hand now definitely pressed against her breast and her lips betrayed too eloquently that the illusion of pain had for the moment regained its ascendency over enlightenment.

"Now, mama——" Gilbert was happily inspired. In these crises it was more effective, sometimes, to divert his mother's attention than to soothe and surrender. "Mr. Plimsoll was here this morning to see you. He said he had something very important to tell you. He said you'd be glad to hear it."

Mrs. Dolliver withdrew swiftly from the verge of grief.

"Why, that must mean—hurry and get the car, Baby! We'll have to go straight down to see him."

Without the indiscreet formality of farewell Gilbert hung up the receiver. He departed toward the garage, his brow furrowed by the frown of baffled, injured innocence, and, as he teased and tickled the venerable engine into sulky, crabbed wakefulness, he thought ungallantly of girls in general and of Lollie Plimsoll in particular.

The frown of one unfairly harried held its place as Gilbert drove. It had abated but little when he parted from his mother in the doorway of the office building at the Intercontinental plant. A cigarette, however, slowly erased the frown, and it had wholly vanished when, descending to the fancied privacy of the farther running board, he gave himself over to grave practice with the large green, rhinestone-studded dice.

Mrs. Dolliver found it possible, for once, to enter Belden Plimsoll's office without the stupid, futile efforts of his underlings to intervene. And for once Plimsoll

himself was sincerely accessory, before the fact and after, to her entry. He spoke with heartiness.

"I've been looking into things, Pansy, and I think it may be possible to arrange matters so that you can make that—uh—that pilgrimage."

"I knew I could count on you, Belden!" Mrs. Dolliver glowed softly. "I always feel that you——"

"Yes, of course." He spoke with some haste and in a manner slightly less cordial. "McFetridge couldn't advance the money. It would be illegal for him to do that. But I think I've found a way around the difficulty."

"I knew you would! You're so wonderful, Belden!"

He laughed uneasily.

"I have to make it very plain that if the matter's arranged, it must be kept absolutely quiet. That's important, Pansy. Unless I can count positively on that, it won't be possible to do anything. If there should be any talk about it, it would make trouble—a lot of trouble."

"I shouldn't dream of breathing a word to anybody," said Pansy. The glow deepened faintly. "I'd so much rather think of it as just another secret between us!"

"Yes. That's it." He discovered that his eye, avoiding Pansy's, had come to rest on the photograph of Albertine, and he transferred it hastily to the window.

"That's one condition," he said. "There's another. I—I couldn't feel right about making it possible for you to go on a long trip like this unless I can be absolutely sure that you're going to be—well, unless I know that there's somebody with you to look after you and——"

He paused. The glow was now uncomfortably warm.

"You're so thoughtful!" Pansy shook her head gently as if in grateful wonder. "It's so sweet of you to be worried about me! But you needn't be. Virgie May McNinch is going, and Celestine Hoffmeister, and Mrs. Dilbey and her husband. And of course there'll be the Swami himself."

"Yes. But I meant—I shouldn't feel right about it if you went over there with just a party of friends, Pansy. I'm afraid I'll have to insist that unless Gilbert goes with you I can't be a party to the thing."

"Gilbert?" Pansy's eyes went wide. "Why, of *course* he's going. That's the whole point of the pilgrimage. How funny of you to dream that I'd go without him, or that he'd let me! Why, he simply can't bear to have me out of his sight for a minute!"

"Yes, I know." Plimsoll held his features firmly under discipline. "But I had a little talk with him this morning and he seemed—well, I got the idea that he wouldn't be willing to leave Lakeport at present."

"Of course he wouldn't," Pansy laughed happily. "I'm here, you see, and nothing under the sun could make Gilbert go one step away from his silly old mama!"

"I meant that he might have some other reason besides that," said Plimsoll. "I thought——"

"Oh, I know!" Pansy laughed again. "You think there might be a *girl!*" Her voice chilled and hardened on the word. "You'd naturally think that—he's so lovely, and the girls keep tormenting him so! There's one brazen creature who keeps telephoning to him and just persecuting him, Belden! But Gilbert doesn't care the least bit for any of them. He'll be glad to get away from this one that keeps telephoning."

Plimsoll suppressed an impulse to resent this slanderous misinterpretation of telephone messages that he deplored as wholeheartedly as Pansy herself but which he knew to be inspired purely by the natural sympathy of a warm-hearted girl for a boy whom a dog catcher would have pitied.

"We'll leave it at that, then. If you'll keep it absolutely quiet, and if Gilbert goes with you, I'll arrange things so that you can finance the trip. Just let me know how much you'll need and I'll see that you get it. Oh, one thing more—how soon do you start?"

"There's a boat on the twenty-ninth that Lal Dass thought would be best. I don't know how to thank you, Belden——"

"Don't try. It's—it's a pleasure to be of service. And you'd better book your passage as soon as you can. It would be a pity if anything prevented you from catching this—this good boat."

He rose and Pansy followed his example.

"I can hardly wait to tell Gilbert," she sighed. "It will mean so much to him!"

Before Plimsoll could intervene she approached the window. With a helpless sense of standing in the shadow of impending tragedy now beyond his power to prevent, he braced himself for the pain of Pansy's distress under the revealment that lay in wait for her.

But she turned to him with a look of gladness and of pride. Her hand beckoned. She whispered.

"Come and look, Belden. Do you see what he's doing? It's one of the reasons I'm so sure I'm right about him."

Plimsoll stared down at the Reincarnate Buddha, profoundly engaged on the running board.

"Don't you see, Belden? Don't you realize what it

means? It's almost uncanny—the way Gilbert has always been so fascinated by that game. Even when he was just a tiny tot he loved it. I didn't realize then how often he must have played it in his Other Boyhood!"

"How's that?" Plimsoll was wholly bewildered.

"Surely you know that pachisi's the national game of India!" said Pansy, patient with an ignorance almost impious. "Gilbert adores it so much that he's always practicing it, just the way he's doing now!"

Speechlessly Plimsoll escorted her to the door. Returning to the window he was witness to the arrival, with an effect of eager impatience, of Lollie's new runabout, and of Lollie herself. He saw her skip down lightly and hasten across the bluestone drive to intrude on Gilbert's rapt pachisi practice. He could hear no word of the conversation that passed between them, but the pantomime that accompanied it was not without significance.

It was easy to understand the concern with which Gilbert, rising, glanced toward the office doorway. He was manifestly undesirous of being found by Pansy in the act of conversation with a girl.

Plimsoll was able, also, to guess that he informed Lollie of this apprehension, for her glance also moved alertly to the door. Familiar with her trick of gesture and attitude, her father could infer that she demanded of Gilbert some concession, a concession reluctantly granted by a nod. With symptoms of content and triumph Lollie returned to her own car just in time to escape discovery on the part of Gilbert's mother, who now appeared at the top of the wide stone stairs.

Without understanding why, Belden Plimsoll discovered that he shared Gilbert's visible relief in the

averted encounter. There was no special reason, as far as Plimsoll was concerned, for desiring that Lollie and Pansy Dolliver should not meet in the driveway before the Intercontinental offices, and yet, as he turned from the window, he was heartily glad that no such meeting had occurred.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PLIMSOLL'S conscience was almost aggressively pleased with him. His judgment, too, approved warmly of the finesse with which he had arranged for the desirable remoteness of Gilbert Dolliver. Of right and in common justice, therefore, he might have looked forward serenely to his evening encounter with his wife and daughter. He was aware of a sense of injury and unfairness as he discovered that he did not want to join them in the library.

Again, informing himself that he wished to inspect his dwarf apple trees, he went past the open door and along the terrace. There had been no observable increase, as yet, in the size of the small green lumps clinging to the branches, but the robins' nest seemed perceptibly more crowded and uncomfortable than when he had last inspected it. The fledgling birds elbowed each other fretfully and lifted loud, peremptory yawps. One of their parents, braving Plimsoll's nearness, swooped down with a laden beak and, pursued by petulant complaint, winged off again.

Plimsoll felt a dull, unwilling sense of fellowship with this elder bird. The poor old robin had been working like a slave since sunrise; he got no thanks; there was no room for him in his home. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right.

Albertine's yoo-hoo came from the library window. It was a yoo-hoo unmistakably light-hearted, and it inspired in Plimsoll a hopeful uplift of spirit. Unless

all was well within doors, Albertine would not have achieved that convincing note of gaiety.

He turned and waved and moved toward her, unreasonably gladdened by the corroborating evidence of her smile.

"Yoo-hoo yourself, Teenie," he called merrily. They kissed, and Albertine found time for a quick whisper.

"She's been perfectly lovely all day. For goodness' sake don't spoil it."

Plimsoll forbore to refute the innuendo that it was ever he who marred the family peace. Lollie, pleasingly erect and graceful on the davenport, smiled amiably up at him.

Peace enfolded him as he surrendered to the soft welcome of his favorite chair. The cares that had seemed to infest the day revealed themselves now as figures in mirage, dissolving as the sunlight paled.

This was the home that Belden Plimsoll had conceived and created, the perfect home, sure refuge from labor and contention; here was the family as Belden Plimsoll's wisdom had planned and organized and trained it. This Albertine conformed exactly to the plans and specifications of Plimsoll's perfected designs; this Lollie, wiggling her fingers in merry greeting, was at once ideal and real.

Here was wisdom justified of her offspring; here a just man was made duly perfect.

"Has it been a hard day downtown, papa?" Albertine spoke with precisely the right degree of interest and solicitude and Lollie permitted the banned style of address to pass unchallenged. Plimsoll's sense of well-being deepened.

"Oh, about as usual."

He knew that it would be discreet to confess, just

here, that he had again been visited by Pansy, but he was too comfortable to introduce the unpleasant topic.

"I was at the plant this afternoon," said Lollie, "but I knew you wouldn't want to be disturbed, so I didn't come in."

Plimsoll was pleased. Here, provably, was the daughter about whom he had boasted to Noonan, the daughter who told her father everything, the good pal, the buddy. Here, too, was the daughter who had learned that a man's business hours are sacred, inviolable even in the name of affection.

"What were you doing there?" he inquired jocularly, "if you didn't come to see me? I thought I was the only boy-friend you had around the plant."

She shook her head, dimpling.

"I went there to see another one this time."

He did not ask her to be more explicit. Vaguely he was conscious of a lessening in his sense of complete well-being. It was not pleasant to have Gilbert Dolliver classified as among Lollie's boy-friends, even in jest.

Lollie, leaning her chin on her palms, her elbows on her knees, laughed softly, as if at a memory mildly amusing. Plimsoll abstained from inquiry; he was fairly sure that there was some connection between that little bubbly laugh and Gilbert Dolliver. Albertine, however, asked imprudently for light.

"I was thinking about last night," said Lollie. She giggled again, and again Plimsoll restrained his curiosity.

"Was the dance funny?" asked Albertine.

"Oh, we didn't go. Gilbert wouldn't. So we just drove around different places and came home."

Plimsoll's heart swelled. He'd been right in telling Noonan that he would hear the tale from Lollie. He

was always right, of course, but there was a special satisfaction in this instance.

"That doesn't sound so frightfully amusing," said Albertine. "Especially in that awful car."

Lollie giggled. "It's the craziest old car in the world. It makes me think of that cook we used to have—the one that was always talking to herself. It goes along grumbling under its breath just exactly like old Katy. 'Sure an' it's me that shud be in me bed this minutt I'm that wake in me back an' me fate like to be the death o' me!' That's just the way Gilbert's old bus sounds!"

Plimsoll chuckled contentedly. This was harmless. There wasn't any reason for alarm or worry. Anybody could get a good laugh out of that old car.

"Is that all you did—just drive around listening to——?"

"Oh, no!" Lollie laughed more heartily. "We stopped at a shanty and had some hot dogs, and asked the man if he could tell us where to find a minister."

"A what?" Albertine sat up, aghast. Plimsoll grinned at her and risked a wink of reassurance.

"A minister. So he'd think we were eloping. And he did. He warned me not to do it, and——"

"I should hope he would!" said Albertine indignantly. "Of all absolutely insane ideas! I always knew that boy wasn't right in his head!"

"Oh, that was my notion," said Lollie. "Gilbert was almost as upset as the hot-dog man."

Albertine drew audible breath but seemed at a loss for words.

"So finally the man sent us to his father-in-law who's a justice of the peace and the most amazing thing happened."

"You don't mean to say that you actually *went?*"

Albertine, in spite of her husband's calming gestures, persisted in taking a serious view.

"Oh, yes. We had to go, because it turned out that this father-in-law—his name's Mr. Fenstermacher and he's just too perfectly adorable—well, he's a bassoon player and as soon as Gilbert heard *that* he was willing to go over to the old piano works——"

Albertine emitted a plaintive echo.

"Yes. You see Mr. Fenstermacher's the night watchman there, because he's so crazy about playing the bassoon that he gave up being a funeraltor——"

It was Plimsoll whose echo now interrupted.

"It's the progressive, up-to-date name for undertaker," Lollie explained. "Mr. Fenstermacher made it up himself. He used to be the most forward-looking funeraltor in Egandale but he gave it all up because if you want to play the bassoon you have to put your whole heart into it. You just ought to hear him play Asleep in the Deep—he's just too marvelous. And he says—" her eyes widened and her voice became solemn—"he says Gilbert's going to be better than he is! He's going to give Gilbert lessons and not charge him one cent for them!"

Albertine shook her head.

"Of all absolutely idiotic things!"

"It sounds," said Plimsoll, chuckling, "as if it must have been fun."

He was anxious only to preserve the grateful peace; he was in excellent humor with the world. Lollie had faithfully repeated Noonan's account, just as her father had known and declared she would. She and he were just a coupla good pals, a coupla buddies. He desired earnestly to continue on this footing. Lollie, however, regarded him less amiably. There

was a distinctly visible groove between her brows and her face was thoughtful.

"Oh, it's always fun to play around with Gilbert," she said slowly, her gaze fixed narrowly upon her father. "He's perfectly marvelous!" As if for emphasis she paused. "I'm ga-ga about Gilbert."

Having been hardened by hearing from Mr. Noonan the unlovely sound and implications of goofy Belden Plimsoll was able to receive this still more abhorrent adjective without permitting his emotions to register themselves upon his countenance. Even toward a daughter who admitted brazenly that she was ga-ga about Gilbert Dolliver, he continued to direct the gaze of loyal buddiness.

Lollie's lips flattened and her eyes, slowly swivelling for a brief survey of Albertine, returned to meet her father's comradely gaze with a definite suggestion of displeasure. This look, however, faded swiftly. Lollie's face became the fond, filial countenance of her photograph, and her voice was round and low and very sweet.

"Every time I see Gilbert," she said, "I can understand why you were so crazy about his mother."

Before Plimsoll could find speech his daughter, in her artless innocence, dealt him a more deadly blow.

"Why was she calling at your office, this afternoon? Gilbert said you asked her to."

CHAPTER TWELVE

SCATTERED, for an instant, by the suddenness and gross unfairness of Lollie's attack, Plimsoll's disciplined faculties rallied nobly to his defence. He was so swiftly restored to his normal speed and clearness of thought that he escaped the error of glancing at Albertine.

This, he knew, would have been, to his wife's cloudy mental processes, a tacit admission of guilt, a recognition, certainly, that he had been at fault and expected her to resent it. Besides, without looking, he was sufficiently aware of how Albertine's face would be arranged, and he neither needed nor desired to behold it.

"Oh," he said carelessly, addressing himself unmistakably to his daughter, "she did stop in for a minute or two." He chuckled. "She wants to take Gilbert on a nice, long sea voyage, Lollie, and she's been having trouble with McFetridge about getting money for the trip."

"Oh," said Lollie, as if the information sated her curiosity. Albertine was still silent. Too silent. Plimsoll was at some pains to avoid encounter with her gaze.

"That's why she came in the other day, too," he continued, chiefly for the sake of escaping a pause already overlong. "She wanted me to——"

"I see. You're going to lend her the money!" Lollie beamed approval of this generosity. "I think that's perfectly NOBLE of you!"

Albertine laughed. It was not in the least a mirthful sound, and its innuendo, to her husband, was wholly clear. It warranted him, however, in looking directly at Albertine, and with the eye now invisible to Lollie he endeavored to blink signals of appeasement and reassurance at her mother. He laughed.

"Of course I'm not going to lend it to her. She just wanted me to talk to McFetridge. I did, and he's going to arrange things. That's all."

"Mf! It's enough." Albertine sniffed. "Taking your time to—to run errands, as if you didn't have anything else to do! Bothering a man as busy as you are with her absurd affairs! She's simply brazen!"

Plimsoll's breath came with less constraint. It was apparent that Albertine's disfavor was focussed sharply upon Pansy and although he was generously tempted to dispute the epithet she had employed, he discreetly held the impulse in check.

"Brazen," Albertine repeated. "Pushing into your office like a—like a peddler!"

"Oh, be fair, mother!" Lollie spoke with reasoned balance. "She isn't as bad as that. Nobody could butt into father's room past all those office boys and secretaries and things—even you and I couldn't."

Albertine started. "That's true! We have to wait outside till we find out whether he's in conference or something, but Pansy Mole can——"

"Pansy can talk a hole right through a brick wall," snapped Plimsoll. "There's a standing order that she's not to get in and it's just about as much use as the Eighteenth Amendment! She walks right through it. You know yourself that she never pays any attention to any talk except her own."

Again he successfully centered Albertine's resentment on Pansy.

"She's just awful!"

"I don't see that," said Lollie, still judicially non-partisan.

Albertine stared blankly at her late ally. "Do you think any nice woman, any LADY, would——"

"I only meant that I don't see why Mrs. Dolliver shouldn't feel free to ask a little favor of father. I think it's perfectly natural for her to go to him when she's up against things, after the way he—well, after all they used to mean to each other."

"Oh!" It was an explosive, outraged gasp. "I won't have you saying such things, Lollie! I won't stand it!"

Lollie opened wide, wounded eyes.

"Why, mother! I only said I didn't think it was so terrible of poor Mrs. Dolliver to come to see father. I don't see what's so dreadful about saying that. After all, it was considerate of her."

"Consid——"

"Yes. I think it was nice of her to come to see him instead of making him use up a lot more of his valuable time to go way out to her house again."

"Again! *Again!*" Albertine whirled to surprise upon her husband's face that look of bewildered, misjudged innocence which handicaps the guiltless suspect with a burden that black guilt escapes. "You went there! You actually went to that woman's house!"

"Now, Teenie!" Vainly he fluttered his left eyelid. "There's absolutely nothing to make a fuss about. I happened to be passing the place and it struck me that if I stopped in I might get out of seeing her at the office. I'd seen McFetridge and I had to tell her——"

He stopped. Unmistakably Albertine's face was arranging itself in the look he knew and dreaded—

the look that invariably preceded one of her lucky guesses—wrong in premise and wholly illogical in deduction, but arriving by blind accident at correct conclusion.

"You're going to give her that money! You are! I knew it!"

"Now, please, Teenie!" He saw that entreaty fell on stony ears and forsook it for the superior defensive policy of a sound attack.

"That's a nice thing to say, isn't it? That's a pretty way to make a man feel glad and comfortable when he comes home from a hard day's work!"

"Work!" said Albertine with bitterness. "Driving out to Elmwood Park to call on Pansy Mole!"

"Stop!" Plimsoll took the commanding note of the office. "We aren't going to have a squabble about this. There's absolutely no reason why I shouldn't go to see Pansy Dolliver or anybody else. There's no reason why I shouldn't lend her money or give it to her, if I choose to, and I'm not going to be badgered and cross-examined like a criminal just because you're silly enough to be jealous of the poor old woman. We won't say any more about it!"

The tone and the happy reference to Mrs. Dolliver's age had immediate effect upon Albertine. Visibly all rebellion subsided; peace, with almost an audible flutter of returning wings, hovered again above the household.

"Yes, really, mother, I do think it's silly to get so hot and bothered about a little thing like this." Lollie still used the voice and mien of thoughtful, dispassionate unbias. "After all, why shouldn't father do something nice for an old friend of his like Mrs. Dolliver? He's been perfectly angelic to poor Cousin Arthur."

It was beyond even Plimsoll's power of self-rule to resist the unworthy impulse that the speech inspired. He knew that Albertine cherished no trace of sentimental regard for her cousin Arthur Timlow; he was quite certain that she regretted not only the thin family fiction as to a boy-and-girl tenderness, but also the remote kinship itself. She didn't like Cousin Arthur; she had objected to Plimsoll's occasional benevolences in the matter of transactions described by Mr. Timlow as little loans. There was no justice whatever in charging Albertine with harboring a romantic feeling for Cousin Arthur.

But there had been no justice, either, in Albertine's suspicions as to Pansy Dolliver's place in Plimsoll's esteem. Turn about was fair play; sauce for the gander was and ought to be sauce for the goose.

"Oh, that's different," he said. It's quite all right for me to support any old friend of my wife's, and of course Arthur Timlow's a cousin, too. It's something absolutely different if I——"

Albertine forsook the field. Abruptly militancy fell from her and gave way to soft, helpless grief. Her hand endeavored vainly to forbid a sob. She fled to the stairs. A door slammed.

Plimsoll, with a feeling of bewildered injury, turned to his daughter, expecting the sympathy of a comrade. He met, instead, a gaze of high, cool reproach.

"Really, father, I do think you might be more considerate! You know how mother feels about Cousin Arthur and it was mean to say that about supporting him! She's hurt and I don't wonder!"

She moved in good order to the stairway. A distant murmur of voices came down. Plimsoll stared blankly upward. Presently, decision in his face, he rang.

"Tell Mrs. Plimsoll," he said crisply to the maid

who answered, "that I've suddenly been called downtown on important business. I shan't be here for dinner and I'll probably have to be rather late in getting home."

"Yes, sir." The maid spoke respectfully, but Plimsoll was obliged to restrain an impulse to argue angrily with insolent unbelief. He went out, shutting the door with decent firmness.

Once more, as he passed the robins' nest, he found himself in sympathy with the harried parent birds.

The poor counterfeit of home that was offered by the club deepened his sense of injury. He detested substitutes on principle and from experience, and as he consumed a cheerless dinner he resented with rising self-commiseration the unfairness that had driven him forth to accept an imitation in lieu of the genuine hearth and board to which he had a clearer title than most men.

He acquitted Lollie of any share in the wrongs from which he suffered. In review her speech and deportment, throughout the late unpleasantness, seemed wholly dutiful and daughterly. She had, perhaps, permitted herself to do him less than justice in her parting word, but this, after all, had been an error born of her warm heart and her ready sympathy with distress, however causeless or well merited that distress might be. The child had been taken in by Albertine's unworthy recourse to tears; herself too straightforward and too proud to think of using that weapon of weakness, she could not even suspect that any other woman would employ it.

For the rest, it was undeniable that Lollie had striven as earnestly to keep the peace as had her father. She had done her best to reason with Albertine's unreason; if it had been her hand that had inno-

cently kindled the blaze, she had certainly tried hard to quench it.

Lollie was all right. Her father's heart warmed toward her; he wished, aware of its absurdity, that Noonan might have heard with his own ear that frank, comradely account of last night's adventure. He felt that Noonan, in spite of his seeming conviction as to the utter buddiness existing between Lollie and her father, harbored private doubts.

By contrast with the shining blamelessness of Lollie, Albertine's behavior suffered sadly. This time, Plimsoll decided firmly, he would not humble himself to regain peace. This time he'd behave as decent self-respect demanded, and wait for Albertine to apologize.

She ought to be made to understand that scenes like this evening's could easily weaken Lollie's love for home. When Albertine came to her senses he would take occasion to explain this to her, to make her see how necessary it was, for Lollie's sake, that such petty, childish bickerings should not happen again.

Knowing that his dignity would require him to stay away until ten at the earliest, he saw before him an evening dismally long and empty. None of the diversions offered by the club appealed to him; he detested bridge and was in no humor for magazines or conversation. He was on the point of stooping to the base narcotic of a movie when he discovered, bearing down upon him with resolute good-will, Albertine's cousin, Arthur Timlow.

In ordinary circumstances Plimsoll would have regretted the encounter, but tonight he regarded it almost with pleasure. Cousin Arthur's society was at its worst preferable to the company of his thoughts, and in the determined affability of Mr. Timlow's face Plimsoll detected a sure omen that there would be

an opportunity to heap coals of fire on Albertine's head by obliging her kinsman with another of those one-way loans. He would be able, at relatively small expense, to demonstrate bigness of heart and broadness of mind; it would decidedly strengthen his position in the negotiations preliminary to an armistice. He smiled, therefore, and greeted Mr. Timlow with a cordiality that was almost sincere.

Cousin Arthur was tall and thin. His face was the face of a thinker; below a high, imposing forehead his eyes surveyed the world through gold-rimmed glasses from which a black silk ribbon depended to form a loop above the shining whiteness of his shirt front. His nose was the high-bridged, angular nose of intellect and command; his mouth was firm, and he moved it with energy and purpose. Outwardly, indeed, Cousin Arthur presented an impressive, convincing aspect of wisdom, of ability, of intense preoccupation with affairs of exceeding moment, affairs in which he played a leading and important part.

To the ear he was even more convincing. His voice was resonantly baritone and he employed it with a grave deliberation, so that he seemed always to give utterance to speech profoundly preconsidered. His mind was a trap for miscellaneous information. On almost any topic he could deliver himself of a date, a name, a fragment of correct opinion, always in the manner of one who gives away free samples from a limitless supply. Even Belden Plimsoll was not wholly proof against his plausibility; in the face of experience he clung to the belief that Cousin Arthur's trouble was chiefly that of the cash-and-carry store: he had the goods, Plimsoll thought, and lacked only the facilities for delivering them.

"Ah, Belden!" Mr. Timlow spoke graciously.

"The very man I wanted to see! I was just on the point of telephoning your house."

He seated himself. There was in the act a strong suggestion that Cousin Arthur conferred a large favor by this semi-public display of intimacy. Plimsoll was obliged to resist a vague feeling of privilege, although his hand automatically touched a pocket to make sure that his checkbook was in its usual place.

"I think I may be able to do something for you," said Cousin Arthur. He beamed benevolently. "You still own that piano plant out at Egandale, don't you?"

Plimsoll opened his eyes. It was wholly unlike Cousin Arthur to approach thus indirectly the usual topic of a small loan. His habit was to come immediately and kindly to the point.

"Yes. Why?" He spoke darkly, for its recent association with young Mr. Dolliver had revived and embittered the soreness of the spot in which the piano factory had stung Belden Plimsoll. He had suffered for five years the pain of sending good money after bad. Taxes, repairs and insurance, the wages of watchmen, had long ago caused him to regret having saved the land and buildings from the wreck of that ill-fated flyer in another man's game.

"It's for sale, I assume," said Cousin Arthur.

"I'd consider a good offer."

"No doubt. And what would be your idea of a good offer?"

Plimsoll hesitated. He had no faith whatever in Cousin Arthur Timlow as a source or agency of gain; a moment ago he would have been blithely willing to be quit, at almost any figure in actual money, of something he regarded as a white elephant of large appetite and unlovely disposition. But his commercial instinct went deep. Even the tenuous possibility of a

sale suggested by Cousin Arthur's interest set in movement subconscious processes of reasoning.

"I ought to get a hundred thousand at the inside," he said. "I might consider shading that figure, but——"

Mr. Timlow seemed pained. "In that case I'm afraid I've wasted my time."

"Hold on. Put your cards on the table. Tell me who your buyer is and we'll see if we can't get together."

"That would be scarcely businesslike," said Cousin Arthur. Plimsoll humbly accepted the condescension of the smile and tone.

"Well, give me some idea, anyway. I don't do business in the dark."

Cousin Arthur reflected briefly.

"I will tell you this," he conceded. "I have a friend who is heavily interested in a certain eastern company that is about to establish a mid-western branch. He will require about the kind of plant you have out there at Egandale, and if I could offer it to him at an attractive figure I think I might persuade him to take it off your hands."

Plimsoll thought it over.

"Well, take it up with him," he said. "Find out if he'd be interested and if he is we can talk figures."

"It would be necessary for me to go to New York," said Mr. Timlow meditatively.

"Go ahead."

"Unfortunately—" Cousin Arthur laughed as if at something mildly humorous—"unfortunately, just at the moment, I should find it difficult to make even a shorter journey. My affairs are——"

Plimsoll reached for his checkbook. Mr. Timlow, with the air of one who negligently confers a trivial

benefaction, folded and pocketed the slip of blue paper.

"I'll go tomorrow." He paused in the act of turning. As if he splendidly stole time from concerns of moment to feign a kindly interest in the domestic affairs of a deserving inferior, he made inquiry as to Cousin Teena and the little girl.

"They're fine," said Plimsoll, rather too curtly.

"Leila must be growing up," said Cousin Arthur, as if his shrewd observation had penetrated to a truth invisible to less percipient eyes. "Let me see—she's eighteen, I think."

"Almost twenty," Plimsoll snapped.

"Twenty! Tsk-tsk-tsk!" With tongue and tooth Mr. Timlow achieved the effect of commenting profoundly upon the instability of time. "She'll be getting married one of these days."

"Oh, I guess not." Plimsoll smiled however, thinking of the admirable young men that waited for Lollie's choosing—Jarrett and Westgate, Averey, Saltonstall, earlier comers no less eligible than these. "I haven't seen any signs of her wanting to leave the old man, so far."

Cousin Arthur laughed. "You'd be the last one to see any such signs, Belden."

"You're wrong there. I'm not the usual kind of a father and Lollie's not the usual thing in daughters, either. We're pretty good friends. I'd be the first to know it if——"

Again Mr. Timlow laughed indulgently. He departed with the aspect of a prime minister slightly overdue at a conference of powers.

Plimsoll, returning to his inattentive perusal of an illustrated English weekly, forgave him the skeptical quality of that final laugh. Timlow didn't know any

better; he naturally judged Belden Plimsoll by other fathers. It was too bad that he couldn't have heard Lollie telling about last night.

He decided he'd better go home. Albertine would have gone to bed as she usually did in times of household discord, and there'd be a chance for a good long confidential talk with Lollie.

Yes. They'd have a good talk. He could get a chance, perhaps, to say something about the decent, worthy boys at the plant—tell Lollie, for instance, how cleverly young Saltonstall had handled that ticklish credit problem in the matter of the São Paulo agency. A thing like that would mean something to Lollie. She had a first rate head for business. And if there were any faint interest in young Dolliver, interest born of pity, of course, the best way of stopping it would be to start Lollie thinking about somebody whom it wasn't necessary to pity, somebody who could be respected, even admired.

Not that young Saltonstall was just the right man, to be sure. There were several things about him that Plimsoll didn't wholly approve. His teeth, for instance, weren't quite straight, and he added an irritating and superfluous *r* to such words as idea, and subtracted it from those, like Harvard, to which it properly belonged. No. Perhaps, after all, it would be just as well to say nothing about that São Paulo business.

It wasn't necessary, anyway. A girl like Lollie could be trusted not to allow her sympathies to sway her clear-eyed judgment of men. It was absurd to think that any girl in sound mind would consider, except as a target for mirth and compassion, a person like young Dolliver, a drone, a contented victim of Pansy Dolliver's vagaries, a dice-thrower, a—Noonan's

phrase suggested itself—a bassoon bug! No girl could regard romantically a man who—

Plimsoll's eye fell absently on the page. A line of letterpress below a half-tone leaped up at him.

MUSICIAN WINS LORD LIVERSWORTH'S DAUGHTER
MR. BERTIE WIMPLE AND HIS BASSOON

The magazine fell to the rug. Belden Plimsoll, no believer in signs and omens, was nevertheless on his way home.

The uneasy sense of seeing handwriting upon the wall went with him, and it was not abated when he learned from the maid who admitted him that Miss Leila had gone out. He did not press the inquiry. He was reasonably certain that his daughter had in some degree followed the regrettable precedent established by Lord Liversworth's.

The thought sent him upstairs with grim resolution. He tapped imperatively on Albertine's door and entered her room without waiting for the unhappy mumble of consent.

"See here, Teenie, we've got to straighten this thing out," he began. "Between us we've done our best to make Lollie discontented with her home. I'm perfectly willing to admit my share of it. I hadn't any right to say what I did about Arthur and I'm sorry I made you cry."

"You didn't." Albertine sounded as if she trembled on the verge, however, of reviving tears. "It was Lollie."

"Lollie! Why, she did everything she could to——"

"To start us quarreling." Albertine sniffed. "That's what made me cry. I didn't see it till she dragged in

Cousin Arthur. I thought it was just—just accidental, till she did that. And after she'd been perfectly sweet to me all afternoon, too! I just couldn't stand it!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" said Plimsoll. "The poor child was trying her best to stop a silly, disgraceful squabble between us."

"To keep it going," Albertine declared. "She began it the minute you came in. She tried her best to make you angry—deliberately telling us about going about with that awful Gilbert Dolliver, asking about ministers! And when that didn't work—and I must say I thought you kept your temper just marvelously, Belden—she told you in just so many words that she was wild about him. Do you think she said that to cheer us up?"

"She was just—just telling us a funny story," said Plimsoll. "She's been brought up to feel that she can tell me—tell us anything. You mustn't read such ugly motives into a perfectly natural, innocent——"

"I suppose it was natural and innocent for her to begin talking about that horrible Pansy Dolliver, too? When she couldn't get you all hot and bothered about Gilbert she b-began on me! She had it all planned out! She knew I'd flare up the minute I found out that you were letting Pansy send you running errands for her."

"She gave you credit for being more sensible than you are, that's all," said Plimsoll sharply. "She took it for granted that you wouldn't lower yourself to show a silly jealousy of Pansy."

"She knew I couldn't help being hurt and ashamed at the way you let that woman impose on you. And when we'd stopped talking about it, she started us all over again by telling me that you'd actually gone

out to the creature's house! And when we had that almost straightened out, she deliberately dragged in Arthur Timlow, just on purpose to make you say something spiteful about him, the way you always do. That's why I cried. I didn't see what she was doing till then, and it just almost killed me! She's perfectly heartless! She tied our tails together and hung us over a clothesline like a couple of cats, just so we'd claw each other!"

Plimsoll was shocked, appalled. "I can't believe it's really you, talking about your own daughter this way! Why, if you'd heard the way she scolded me for making you cry——"

"Yes! So as to be sure you'd go off to sulk at the club instead of coming upstairs and making up with me!"

"Don't say such things! She came up to comfort you herself!"

"Comfort me! I wish you'd heard her! I just wish you'd heard what she said to me and how she said it, when I was so miserable I just wanted to die! She said: 'Really, mother, if you can't think of any better way to manage your husband than this cheap cry-baby act it's no wonder he's making such a fool of himself about that Dolliver woman!' And then she walked into her room and changed her shoes and began to clog—I mean, tap—and she whistled, to do it by. She whistled that tune about Tony the Greek for six days in the week but on Sunday for one day he's Spanish! And if you call that comforting me, I don't!"

Against his will Plimsoll was impressed. Albertine, he knew, couldn't possibly have invented that brutal speech.

"She's just a child," he urged. "She doesn't realize——"

"She's older than I was when I *had* her. And she's ever and ever so much smarter than either of us. She can just twist us both around her finger. She's going to keep on twisting us till she gets her way about going to New York. She'll do anything. She'll pretend to be crazy about Gilbert Dolliver. She'll——"

"She'll have to do it at pretty long range, then. Gilbert's starting for India on the twenty-ninth, Teenie. That's why I kept winking at you this afternoon. I'm putting up the money for that trip. I think you're absolutely wrong, of course, about Lollie. I don't believe for a minute she'd pretend to like Gilbert simply to worry us. I think she's sorry for him, that's all, but I'd rather spend a little money to ship him off to India than run any risk of her feeling too sorry for him."

Albertine sat up in bed.

"And you sound pleased with yourself! You actually think you're doing something clever!"

"Well, I do think it's a pretty good scheme, at that," he admitted. "Of course I wouldn't insult Lollie by thinking she could ever like a useless young whelp like Gilbert, but——"

"But you're going to do your best to make her, just the same," Albertine interrupted. "You're going to give her a lovely chance to feel persecuted; you're going to send the boy away so that she can forget how awful he is and imagine that she's a regular Juliet! I don't believe anything could ever make her like him, but maybe you can do it!"

Plimsoll was patient with this absurd and unjust attitude. In proverbs, perhaps, absence might make hearts more fond, but as a practical man he placed

his faith in the sound physical principle that nobody can drink from a bottle that is ten or fifteen thousand miles away.

"Well, don't worry any more tonight," he said. "Get some sleep and things will look different in the morning."

He went out without answering Albertine's parting suggestion that this difference might be for the worse. After lying awake for some little time he was able to follow his own prescription as to both worrying and sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ALTHOUGH her parents were familiar with several of the dissimilar personalities that inhabited, at different times, the comely physical embodiment of Miss Leila Plimsoll, nobody was even slightly acquainted with the permanent tenant and proprietor of those premises.

Neither Belden Plimsoll nor his wife, in their most optimistic moments, suspected the existence of this Lollie, a Lollie infinitely superior in all respects to her father's fondest imaginings, a Lollie whose motives and impulses were above question or reproach, whose processes of thought were direct, unerring, infallibly accurate, whose character was patient, honest, loyal and affectionate, and who possessed what was in all probability the only perfect sense of humor in the world.

This Lollie Plimsoll was not even consciously known to herself, for it had not as yet occurred to her to examine and appraise her spiritual being with the calmly objective and critical gaze that frequently inspected those aspects capable of reflection in quicksilvered glass or polished metal. To herself this Lollie Plimsoll was invisible except when some imperfect process of refraction dimly suggested—nearly always by contrast—a small part of her curious superiority to other beings human in appearance, speech and conduct.

Obscurely, for instance, the existence of this Lollie Plimsoll became perceptible to herself, briefly and

incompletely, during the unseemly disagreement between her parents that had lately shattered the peace and decorum of the big house on the summit of East Hill. It was impossible, confronting the contrasting behavior of Belden Plimsoll and Albertine his wife, to escape some faint recognition of a daughter who was singularly unlike them, but in Lollie Plimsoll's attitude toward this daughter there was absolutely no trace of the lip-smacking vanity of the Pharisee. There was rather a feeling of sadness, a generous and compassionate regret that no one else had the good fortune to be exactly like Lollie Plimsoll.

This mystified regret, however, was at most a fragmentary, fleeting thought. It was not of herself that Lollie pondered, but of others, and most immediately and frequently, of her parents. Her own qualities of mind and heart did not concern her, and there was in her, as yet, no court of justice empowered to review her opinions, her desires, her words and actions, since these, being hers, could not be questioned even to be vindicated. With the same sincerity and conviction that Louis XIV declared it, Lollie Plimsoll might have said, had it occurred to her to remark upon the obvious, "The state? That's me!"

It was this Lollie Plimsoll who waited for the summonsing hoot of a bassoon. It was this Lollie who could not only forgive such parents as hers, not only find excuses for their weaknesses, their ignorance and folly, but actually persist in being fond of them. This Lollie, viewing as a man watches a mole burrow under sod the pathetically visible manœuvres of her father as to Gilbert Dolliver, could pardon him and keep on loving him even while she considered the ways and means of necessary circumvention and rebuke.

Of course, too, she could understand him. She

knew that his clumsy efforts to thwart her in the pursuit of the career for which nature had obviously designed her did not spring from malice, but from the illusions common to all persons of advanced age. She knew that he really believed that his dimmed, blurred eyes saw more clearly than her clear, accurate gaze; he believed his feeble old mind could reason more logically than her vigorous young brain; most pathetically of all, he clung to the fancy that he knew more than his daughter about this world of hers, this modern world in which he lingered like some melancholy survival from a buried past, a duck-billed platypus, a roc, a dodo.

Only a slight indignation warmed Miss Plimsoll's calm, judicial review of her father's several high crimes and misdemeanors. Chiefly she resented only two of these: the injustice and oppression that had compelled her to make a weapon out of such abhorrent raw material as Gilbert Dolliver, and the still more high-handed outrage of attempting to take that makeshift implement from the hands that had formed it, the hands, therefore, that owned it.

Owned it. Very definitely, at this point in her deliberations, Lollie accepted, in respect to Gilbert Dolliver, a sense of property. The fact that he was a weapon became less significant than the fact that he was her weapon; her father, in trying to wrest him out of her grasp, was not defending himself against a menacing instrument of justice, but attempting by violence and guile to deprive her of a possession.

The negligible value of this possession did not affect the merits of the question. It was necessary, for reasons of both principle and policy, to resist and punish. Gilbert Dolliver, or at least Gilbert Dolliver's usefulness in the conflict between Lollie Plimsoll and her

father, belonged to Lollie, and nobody was going to take him away from her without a battle.

It was a far-reaching process that was thus insignificantly begun. Not even the insight and intelligence of Lollie were able, at this point, to perceive the colossal, breath-stopping consequences of recognizing Gilbert Dolliver as hers, a poor thing, a very poor thing, but her own.

Nevertheless, as the sullen basso groan of the bassoon announced his presence in the driveway, Gilbert had already acquired in Miss Plimsoll's sight the redeeming virtue of belonging to her, and was, like all that she consented to possess, worth owning, worth defending, worth keeping.

It was to defend and keep that she went forth to fight, and, like her father, she chose as the surest and shrewdest defensive measure, to attack. As she took her place beside the ungallantly reluctant Mr. Dolliver she aimed and fired the opening gun of battle.

"I hear," she said, with an innocence that did not seem to weigh its unconsidered words, "I hear your mother's going to take you back to India."

Very delicately she stressed one of these words, a word which might be—and instantly was—interpreted to make subtle, unkind allusion to the hypothesis that this would not be Gilbert's first appearance in the land most immediately illumined by the Light of Asia.

Gilbert sat up in sudden anger.

"Back?" he echoed hotly. "Back?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"THERE, there, darling! Don't run a temperature about it!" Lollie's hand rested soothingly on Gilbert's sleeve. "I was only repeating what I heard. It's not my fault if your mother goes around telling everybody—well, you know what I mean. I'm not to blame because she's taking you over there to India and——"

"Your father is, though!" Gilbert jerked his elbow away from the appeasing hand. "If he hadn't gone and fixed up the money end of it we wouldn't be going. And if you think I brought you along just to let you razz me about it, you can take another guess and that's that!"

"Razz you? Why, Gilbert!" Lollie's voice quivered with the pain of wounded innocence. "Do you think I'd do such a thing, when you're going away off to India and I'm just *sick* about it?"

The quiver became a wobble, and Lollie's shoulder, perhaps by accident, touched Gilbert's arm, an arm still ungallantly rigid but sufficiently relaxed to tolerate the contact.

"I don't see what difference it makes to you," said Gilbert.

"Well, it makes a lot! Wouldn't you care if you were going to stay here and I were going away?"

"You bet I wouldn't." Firmly, now, Mr. Dolliver repulsed the gentle pressure against his arm. "What are you trying to do, anyway? Vamp me?"

"Pig!" Lollie sat indignantly straight. "You

might at least be polite to me, when I've got to stay in this perfectly repellent town and you're going off on a gorgeous trip!"

"Huh?" Gilbert coughed interrogatively. "You think it's gorgeous to go off on a joy ride with Virgie May McNinch and Mrs. Hoffmeister and a fat old Hindu? Be yourself! You're sitting pretty. You don't have to leave Lakeport just when there's something stirring around here at last!"

He turned to send a possessive glance back at the faithfully attending headlamps.

"Do you mean you don't want to go?" The note of bewilderment in Lollie's tone was highly convincing. "Would you really rather stay here than——"

"Say, would anybody want to go on a party like that?"

"But you're going, aren't you?"

"That doesn't mean I want to!"

"Then somebody's making you do it?"

"How did you guess it?" Gilbert spoke impatiently.

"Your mother?"

"You think I'd let anybody else do a thing like that to me?"

"No. And I don't see why you let her do it, either. That's what I can't understand."

"Why, I've got to!" Gilbert sounded exasperated. "She—she's my mother, isn't she? I have to do what she wants, don't I?"

Lollie regarded him with interest. It was her first encounter with any such attitude, on the part of a contemporary, toward the spirit and letter of the Fifth Commandment.

To this young man beside her obedience to a parent seemed a law of nature too obvious and potent to be

questioned. The tone in which he had spoken made this wholly clear.

It was a moment of far-reaching consequences, but these were not apparent to Lollie. She was aware only of a sense of ownership now enhanced by the unexpected discovery of one of those defects which set apart and make unique a possession otherwise commonplace and valueless. She had the feeling that comes to the owner of a first edition marred by an unduplicated misprint. In all human probability Gilbert Dolliver was the only extant specimen of his kind.

It was not a discovery to be taken for granted. She tested carefully.

"Do you really feel that way about it, Gilbert?"

"What way about what?"

"About minding your mother. Do you think you have to do everything she wants you to?"

"I don't have to, exactly." The tone of purely scientific research that Lollie had employed seemed to engender in Gilbert a like spirit of impersonal investigation. "I—well, I don't see what's so funny about it. You do it yourself. You don't have to do what your father says but you'd sooner give in than do the other thing, I guess."

"If I did I'd probably be married to some perfectly repulsive little adding-machine addict right now!" The reflection suggested another test. "Suppose your mother ordered you to marry somebody, Gilbert? Would you——"

"Huh!" Gilbert's cough had the sound of amused security. "That's one thing I don't need to worry about, anyway! That's about the last thing on earth she'd want to do to me! Why, if she'd seen you talking to me this afternoon—" his voice sobered—

"she might have had one of her heart attacks right there on the steps!"

"Oh!" Lollie used her ice-cream voice. "You can tell her she needn't be alarmed about me. I'm not the least bit dangerous."

"I know it," said Gilbert, "but it wouldn't make any difference to her. She'd be just as upset if she knew I was out with you as she would be if I went out with somebody I liked." He coughed again. "No, sir! I don't have to worry about that!"

It was clear to Lollie that she sat beside a prodigy. This boy was so unbelievably docile that he actually would be worried by the mere thought of a maternal effort to dictate as to his marriage. She saw that it wasn't going to be easy to steel and stiffen such spinelessness to the point of rebellion against the relatively minor outrage of being taken to India. To Belden Plimsoll's daughter, however, difficulty was a challenge and a spur. Gilbert wasn't going on the pilgrimage. That was settled finally in Lollie's mind. Neither his mother's authority, Belden Plimsoll's unworthy use of money nor Gilbert's own superlative passivity should remove him from Lakeport before Lollie Plimsoll had finished using him.

Pure instinct prompted her choice of the method by which to protect her property. She twisted to stare back at the pursuing headlights.

"He's still after us," she said.

"Yeh." Gilbert's tone brightened. "He didn't trail me this afternoon, and I was afraid he'd quit, but he was parked at the end of the alley when I came out tonight."

"Did you find out anything today?"

"Not a thing." He shook his head. "It's cert'nly

queer. I don't see why anybody'd want to spend good money just to find out where I go."

Lollie, who had been fairly sure, last night, as to the author and motive of the espionage, was now quite certain as to both. She would have known it from her father's suspiciously calm reception of her story about last night's adventure, a story which, if Belden Plimsoll had not been prepared for its disclosures, must infallibly have moved him to the display of stronger emotions than he had shown. There was ample corroboration, too, in that early call on Mrs. Dolliver and in the sudden generosity with which the Indian pilgrimage had been financed.

Instinct, however, warned Lollie against sharing her enlightenment with Gilbert. The charm of being shadowed manifestly stood as a cogent reason for staying at home instead of going to India, and much of this charm would be lost if the disappointingly tame truth as to its instigator and his motives were made clear.

"Let's have some fun with him, anyway," she proposed. "It's a pity to waste him this way. We ought to give him a chance to do some real ground and lofty detecting."

"Well, all he can do is trail us," said Gilbert. "He can do that no matter where we go, and I want to get another bassoon lesson tonight."

Instinct put another instrument into Lollie's willing hand.

"It's certainly a pity about that, too," she said. "If you didn't have to go off to India so soon you'd be able to learn how to play pretty well."

"Yes. Huh!" Gilbert coughed gloomily. "Yeh. That's right."

"I don't suppose you'd be allowed to play it on the

steamer, either," Lollie mused regretfully. "Or afterwards, even—you'll be living in hotels and I shouldn't think they'd let you practice a bassoon very much in a hotel room."

"Well, I can play it tonight, anyway," said Gilbert. "That's one thing." The ancient car made a forlorn spurt. "If I get a couple of hours' practice every night I ought to learn something before I leave."

"Yes, and you'll forget it before you get another chance to play," Lollie pointed out. "I must say I think you're pretty easy, Gilbert! Giving up your career and everything just because a fat old Swami's talked your mother into believing you're——"

"It wasn't the Swami's notion," Gilbert objected. "Mama thought that one up herself."

"Well, he put it into her head, just the same. She'd never have thought of it, would she, if he hadn't converted her to his old religion?"

"No, I guess she wouldn't." The idea, manifestly, was new and distasteful to Gilbert. "I never looked at it that way, but I guess it's so."

"And she certainly wouldn't have dreamed of taking you to India if he hadn't put her up to it."

"No. The worst she ever did before the Swami showed up was taking me to Chicago to talk to the Baha's nephew. That was when we were Bahaists." Gilbert spoke in the matter-of-fact tone of one to whom a periodic change of religion seems a natural and inevitable business. "We were Reformed Theosophists before that. I guess we've been pretty near everything, one time or another."

"Well, what I mean is that it's really the Swami that's making you go to India," said Lollie. "And I should think you'd be ashamed to let him do it! Here you've got this marvelous chance to learn how to play

your bassoon and amount to something in the world, and besides that you're being shadowed just like an important criminal, and what do you do? You give it all up just because a fat old colored man wants to get you over to India where he can dress you up in long robes and pretend you're——"

"Well, what can I do about it?" said Gilbert peevishly. "I can't help it, can I? What's the use of talking? Anyway, it's my business. I don't see what difference it makes to you."

"Don't you really?" Lollie swiftly abandoned the appeal to reason for a device more elementary and less open to debate. Again, as if by accident, contact softly established itself between sleeve and sleeve. "Don't you think I'm going to miss you?"

"Huh!" The contact was bruskly interrupted; strong displeasure and a certain consternation were involved in Gilbert's cough. "Are you getting cow-eyed about me now? Murder! When does that boat start?"

"Don't try to be silly," said Lollie severely. "You don't have to. You know perfectly well just how likely I'd be to get soppy about you. All I meant was that when you go I won't have any more chances to play around with a human bloodhound on my trail. And it's the best fun I've had since—" she hesitated, giggled—"since that time at dancing school when I put chewing gum in your curls."

"Huh," said Gilbert again. Rancor embittered the sound. "So it was you that did that, was it? I always thought it was Genevieve Linkletter."

"It was Genevieve's gum," said Lollie, "but I was the one that got the idea." She giggled again, unwisely.

"And I suppose you think I'm going to keep on

lugging you along with me every night, don't you?" said Gilbert. "Huh! Watch me! It isn't going to make any difference to you when I go to India—not as far as the detective business goes. This is your last trip, right now."

"That's nice, isn't it?" Lollie spoke indignantly. "That's a nice gentlemanly way to treat me for something I did when I was eight years old! When if it hadn't been for me you'd never have found out about Mr. Fenstermacher being a bassoon player."

"Well, if you think it's so funny to get a wad of gum combed out of your hair, you just try it, some time! You just try it and see how you like it!" Reviving memories of indignity and anguish smouldered in Gilbert's tone. "Just wait till I take you out again!"

Instinct guided Lollie once more.

"I don't see why you're so mean to me! I know it was a perfectly poisonous trick and that's why I owned up and apologized when I didn't have to." The quivery little wobble reintroduced itself in her muffled voice. "I think you're perfectly heartless!"

"Oh, say, Lollie! Look—I didn't mean——"

In his anxiety to avoid the imminent catastrophe of tears Gilbert gave to the delicate task of driving less of his attention than was demanded by a steering gear long past its prime. The front wheels indulged in a senile shimmy, the steering wheel jerked free of the left hand that Gilbert had left unassisted in order to employ his right hand in solacing pats on Lollie's huddled shoulder. Gently, as a weary wayfarer toward rest and shade, the car withdrew from the concrete and, sighing profoundly, gave itself to repose below the drooping branches of wayside elms.

"Look, Lollie——"

The headlights of a following car dwelt briefly on the well-meant endeavor of both of Gilbert's hands to administer first aid. Possibly by accident, perhaps because the lights themselves intimidated her, Lollie leaned slightly toward the reassurance of these hands at that moment when the overtaking glare was nearest and brightest, but no sooner had it passed than she recovered her composure and sat up straight.

"I'm sorry I gave way like that," she said, "but I just couldn't help it. This is the only fun I've got and when you said I couldn't come again——"

"I didn't mean—I don't mind having you along. You can come if you want to so much, I guess."

The statement, if lacking something in enthusiasm, sufficed to restore Lollie's normal cheerfulness. She pointed to a red dot beside the roadside a little distance ahead.

"He's stopped. He's waiting for us."

"Yeh." Gilbert stepped on the starter. There was a tired groan of gears but no response on the part of cylinders. Gilbert fiddled expertly with complicated apparatus on steering post and dash, but only the drone of the starter rewarded him. He coughed twice.

"I'll bet she's out of gas again," he said, his tone that of one who hazards hopefully an ingenious hypothesis. Descending he snapped his cigarette lighter above the gauge of the tank. "Yeh! I thought it must be gas." There was a certain pride, as of vindicated diagnosis, in the speech; but no sign of annoyance or concern. He fumbled under a rug in the tonneau and extracted, with a hollow clangor, a large square tin, which he exhibited to Lollie with the self-approval of an inventor.

"I save a lot of time," he said, "carrying this can. Any time I run out of gas I don't have to borrow one

from a filling station. You see you pretty nearly always walk back to get gas, because you can generally remember seeing a pump somewhere behind you and you don't know how far it might be to the nearest one ahead, and if you don't carry your own can this way, you'd have to drive back to return the one you borrowed. You can save a lot of time, noticing little things like that."

There was a short pause, as if Lollie vacillated between conflicting emotions before deciding to giggle in applause of so much observation and forethought. She climbed down.

"I saw a place a little way back there," she said. "Come on."

Gilbert glanced down the road at the red point of tail light.

"I guess he'll wait for us, all right."

"He's got to, hasn't he?"

"Yeh. That's right." Gilbert was manifestly reassured. They started back, the tin thumping pleasantly against Gilbert's knee to provide a musical accompaniment.

"It's pretty out this way," Lollie remarked.

"Yeh."

"It wouldn't be a bad place to live. It's not so far from town and yet it's real country."

"Kind of lonesome," Gilbert said. "I guess it'd be bad for a person's nerves, living where it's so quiet."

Lollie laughed. "It wouldn't be too quiet anywhere if a person played a bassoon."

"No." Gilbert was impressed by the soundness of this. "That's right. And you kind of need room for a bassoon, too." He surveyed the sleeping countryside with more approval. The tin bumped contentedly

against his knee. A bend in the road led abruptly to a view of a small white building standing between tall signboards set at obtuse angles to its flanks and illuminated by a rather lavish use of electricity.

"Here's the place," said Lollie. She glanced back over her shoulder and quickened her pace.

"That's no filling station," Gilbert objected. "Where's the pump?"

The farther signboard was now legible. Lollie read it aloud.

STOP AND SEE PARADISE

This is Lakeport's Little Bit of Heaven
Paradise Heights Manor Park Gardens Estates
Model Home Now Open Office on Premises
Don't Pass Paradise

"Rats! Nothing but a real-estate office!" Gilbert bumped the can morosely against his knee. "Come on. There's a station farther back. I remember noticing it." His tone brightened a little. "I always kind of notice, so I'll know how far I've got to walk if I run out of gas."

"Wait. There's somebody in that office. Maybe we can get some gas from him."

Lollie's hand dwelt lightly on Gilbert's sleeve. Again she glanced back briefly.

"Let's ask him anyway. I'm too tired to walk very far."

"But——" Gilbert's protest yielded to the pathetic, weary droop that now bowed Lollie's shoulders. "Oh, all right, then."

A plump man greeted them at the doorway, a man of unmistakable good-will. He exhibited gold-crowned molars in the wide earnestness of his smile

and spoke with the honest joy of one who welcomes the arrival of eagerly awaited friends.

"Come right in! Right this way, right this way! I'll show you the finess homesite opportunity in the state—a chance to live where life is worth living and I don't mean possibly! Here's a little country estate at a price that wouldn't buy standing room in a crowded, noisy, smoky city, a country home with every city convenience, streets, sidewalks, water, telephone, electricity——"

"We're looking for gas." Gilbert contrived to insert the speech into a minute crevice in the fat man's eloquence.

"It'll be on the spot by the time you've built, and suppose it wasn't? Juss suppose, because we're juss on the point of closing with the company right now, but suppose we weren't? Do you mean to tell me that you'd let a little thing like gas stand between you and an opportunity that comes once in a lifetime? Gas? Why——"

"Gas for the car." Gilbert waved the tin. "All we want——"

"Oh!" Only for an instant a cloud shadow dimmed the resolute radiance of the fat man. "I'll run you down to the filling station in my car as soon as I've shown you the house thass all ready for you to step right in and take possession! Oil heat, electric refrigerator, breakfast nook, tiled bazz, glassed in sun porch, four fireplaces, built-in vacuum cleaning system——"

"We don't——" Gilbert began. Lollie interrupted quickly.

"Let's go and see it. We might as well, as long as Mr.——"

"Mr. Greminger," said the fat man. "B. Clifford

Greminger." He shook hands earnestly with them both, removing the tin neatly from Gilbert's clutch.

"As long as Mr. Greminger's going to drive us after gas," Lollie finished. "We'll save time, Gilbert. Come on."

Mr. Greminger paused only to lock the door of the tiny office. Without pause, however, in the swift flow of his words, he led the way briskly back from the highway along a new graveled road curving between boulders and scattered trees. It rose along the face of a gentle slope and arrived, just as Mr. Greminger had reached the cheerful topic of second mortgages, at a shadowy house faintly silhouetted against the stars, a low-roofed outline, which, in spite of the darkness, brought a delighted gasp to Lollie's lips.

"How perfectly darling!"

"You took the words right out of my mouth," declared Mr. Greminger. "And juss wait till you get a look at the stationary tubs! Thass all! Juss wait till you cass your eye on the garbage incinerator!"

He dealt with a lock, snapped a switch. Again, delightedly, Lollie gasped, and again, snatching the speech from Mr. Greminger, she employed the word darling to describe a vista of paneled hall and stair.

"I'd have a pair of straight-backed Jacobean chairs right there and there," she announced. "And I'd put cream scrim curtains on that window over the landing."

"Absolutely my idea," said Mr. Greminger. "Absolutely!" He snapped on more lights, revealing, beyond an arched doorway, a long living room of rough, creamy walls and red-tiled floor, with a wide, friendly chimney breast and deep hearth. Lollie made a soft, dove-like sound of rapture, and Mr. Greminger, thrusting thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat,

now permitted what he described as his proposition to speak for itself.

"We ought to be getting that gas," said Gilbert uneasily. Mr. Greminger's eye, sweeping to dismiss this irrelevancy, came to rest on the window.

"Excuse me juss one second!"

With a swift and soundless movement remarkable in so large and ponderous a body, he darted to the door. A murmur of voices came in, slightly preceding Mr. Greminger's return, escorting, almost propelling, an unhappy-looking man, short of neck and deeply blue about the jaws, jaws firmly set upon the cold, bitten remnant of fat cigar.

"No need to stand outside and peek in through a window, brother!" Mr. Greminger's broad palm administered a slapping reassurance to the shoulder of his captive. "Come right in. Thass what I'm here for. No more trouble to show this house to three people than to two—no trouble anyway. Showing a house like this is a pleasure, thass what it is. Now you juss take a look at the dining room."

Significantly pinched, on every suitable occasion, by the fingers that continued to possess his sleeve, Gilbert submitted to the tedium of an exhaustive survey of cellar and sleeping porch and garage, maintaining a silence as uneasy as that of the blue-chinned man himself.

Lollie and Mr. Greminger atoned for this silence, united by an enthusiasm that waxed apace over the remarkable compactness and convenience of the electric refrigerator, the adorable roominess of closets and the darling pale-green tiles inwalling a glass-screened shower.

"This," said Mr. Greminger, "could be used for a den, or a music room, maybe."

Lollie pinched Gilbert's arm. "You could play your bassoon here!"

Mr. Greminger, staring briefly at Gilbert, agreed earnestly that this was possible, but his ardor dimmed a little, and he seemed almost content, at last, to snap off the lights and return to the office. Here, glancing about, he turned to the unhappy Mr. Noonan.

"Where's your bus, brother?"

Mr. Noonan moved his head to indicate the direction and, enlightened by the several references on Gilbert's part to the urgency of procuring gas, spared himself the labor of invention.

"Run out of gas," he said, speaking past the frayed remainder of his cigar. "That's how I happened to——"

"Don't say happened, brother!" Mr. Greminger became solemn. "Things don't happen—not things like this. No, sir! Think it over. Juss think what the odds would be against two cars running out of gas right at one place, right at one time, right when I was juss ready to lock up and go home! No, sir—that isn't any accident."

"Why not?" demanded Noonan, rather aggressively. "You trying to make out it's a frame-up or something?"

Mr. Greminger laughed. "Well, I guess iss a frame-up, at that. My guess is that a—a quincidence like this couldn't happen without it was meant to happen. Yes, sir—that's how I look at it." He sobered. "Yeah—I dope it out that there's got to be a reason behind a thing like that. Thass how I account for my success in the real-estate game. I don't figure it's juss luck when a thing like this happens—I figure iss meant. I figure you ran out of gas right here tonight because if you hadn't you might never

of seen this Paradise Heights Manor Park Gardens Estates Homesite prop'sition. You notice I didn't try to strong-arm you into signing on the good old dotted line. I wouldn't do it. The way I look at it you wouldn't 've run out of gas this way if it wasn't meant for you to own a home out here in Paradise Heights Manor Park Gar——"

"Huh-huh. We—we better go get that gas," Gilbert suggested. He spoke with a slight suggestion of alarm and, as if to make certain that the veiled, grim figure of Destiny was not visibly present behind him, glanced over a shoulder.

Mr. Greminger, assisting Lollie to the front seat of his car, opened the rear door for Gilbert and Noonan. His voice came back confidently as he expounded to Lollie his philosophies as to life and the real-estate game. This continued during the purchase of gasoline and the return drive to Gilbert's car, and concluded, as Mr. Greminger shook hands in ritual leavetaking, in peroration under which Gilbert again glanced behind him and coughed thrice.

"You don't see me trying to stampede you, do you?" Mr. Greminger addressed Gilbert, retaining hold, the while, of the hand that was unimpeded by the gasoline tin. "I'm not even trying to date you up for another call. I haven't even made a play to get your name or your little lady's, have I? Well, I'll tell you why. Iss because I don't figure a man has to try and push Fate along. No, sir. I'm not worrying, because I know you and the little lady'll be back. I'm not even telling you to act quick if you want that house before somebody else grabs it, because I've got a hunch. Uh-huh. A hunch that you and her wouldn't of run out of gas if it wasn't all framed up in advance that one of these days you and the little lady'd be living

right out here in your own corner of Paradise Heights Manor Park Gar——"

Gilbert coughed again, more apprehensively, and succeeded in withdrawing his hand. Mr. Greminger chuckled.

"No, sir. One the main reasons why I'm a success in the real-estate game lays right there. I don't invess my time and sales talk on people without my instinct tells me iss *meant* for 'em to do business with me, and the minute I unlocked the door of that house tonight my instinct told me I was unlocking it for the folks it was built for."

Reëntering his own car, parked behind Gilbert's, Mr. Greminger emitted a confident "So long" and drove on, accompanied by the taciturn Mr. Noonan. He paused, however, long enough to make a brief notation in a pocket memorandum book.

Lollie sighed softly, a sigh of profound submergence in pleasant revery.

"Wasn't it perfectly darling, Gilbert? Did you notice the adorable way the kitchen cabinet was built in so as to make the breakfast nook? And——"

"You certainly got us into a nice jam this time," said Gilbert. "Now that fat, strong, silent real-estater's got the notion we——" he paused, thought deeply, and setting down the tin of gas, strode to the fence and rapped solemnly on the top rail. By way of additional precaution the fingers of both hands were emphatically crossed. "Fate, too—we tried some religion once that had Fate in it. Be a nice thing, wouldn't it, if—" he whistled and once more sought to avert, by contact with a non-conductor, the lightning stroke of Destiny.

"Don't be foolish!" Lollie spoke sharply. "As if a person could be made to——"

"I've been made to do a whole lot of things before now," said Gilbert darkly.

"Well, don't worry. You won't be made to do anything like—that!"

"There'll be enough grief anyway, when that tongue-tied bird comes around trying to sell us a nice lot in Paradise Heights Manor Park Gardens Estates," said Gilbert with bitterness. "That's a nice thing, too! Paradise! Huh! Me, living in a place with a name like that—and married to you! Huh!"

"You needn't bother about breaking it to me gently that I mustn't hope," said Lollie. "I've guessed it for myself and I'm resigned to it. And don't worry about Mr. Greminger. He doesn't know who we are. He can't bother us."

"Yeh. That's right." Gilbert seemed to find a slight comfort in the reflection. He poured gas into the tank and after some persuasion the engine consented to take up the weary burden of existence. They overtook Mr. Greminger's car, parked now, behind that of Noonan. Once more Mr. Greminger dealt with memorandum book and pencil, which he waved amiably as the elderly car groaned past.

Mr. Greminger did not believe in prodding a friendly destiny, but he held no narrow prejudice against making a note as to the license number of any prospective customer, however manifestly foreordained to dwell, subject to first and second mortgages, in Paradise.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AS FAR as was consistent with his sensitive regard for the ethics of his calling, Mr. Noonan mercifully tempered his account of last night's adventure in respect to Paradise Heights. Himself a father, the detective desired to spare those feelings which, in Belden Plimsoll's situation, he would have himself experienced, but the manner in which his softened narrative was received moved him, at last, to speak frankly, as one man and parent to another.

"I been trying to tone things down all I can, Mr. Plimsoll, because I got a daughter of my own and I know how I'd feel if I found out she was going round looking at houses with a lad like Gilly Dolliver, but I guess I ain't getting it across to you that this thing's serious. I don't want to worry you, but——"

"You couldn't worry me this morning," said Plimsoll. His gesture invited the detective's attention to the humidor and Mr. Noonan's lip fitted itself gratefully to the round plumpness of a belted perfecto. "Remember what I told you yesterday? I said my daughter'd tell me about what happened the night before, didn't I? Well, that's exactly what she did. Told me of her own accord the minute I got home—told me every single thing just exactly as you'd already told it."

He leaned back complacently.

"That's why this doesn't upset me. I know it doesn't amount to anything. She'll tell me the whole

yarn this noon—she's coming down to lunch with me—and we'll have a good laugh over it together."

Noonan said nothing. His cigar, however, twirled itself skilfully to the opposite corner of his mouth and something in the manœuvre suggested that the detective, holding his tongue, held also his private opinions.

"I'll tell you something about this father business, Noonan—something that may be useful to you in managing your own daughter." He leaned forward. "As long as they tell you things, you never need to worry. As long as your daughter speaks right up, without being asked, and tells you all about this boy or that one, you can——" he paused, groping for a suitably expressive phrase and was happily served by memory—"you can write it on your cuff that there's nothing much for you to worry about."

This reasoning, which had not greatly impressed him when advanced by Albertine, now seemed so excellent that he believed quite sincerely that he had thought of it himself. It did not, however, wholly reassure Noonan.

"Yeah," he said. "That's the right dope, all right. The main thing is to keep on being good pals with 'em, the way I am with Eileen. Just a coupla buddies. But I'd do some worrying, I guess, if my Eileen got going around looking at houses with a lad like Gilly——"

"I might myself," said Plimsoll, "if my daughter didn't always tell me she was doing it. I might anyway, perhaps, if I didn't happen to know that it couldn't go on more than a few days longer."

He paused briefly, resisting a temptation to acquaint Noonan with his actuating part in the matter of the Indian journey. Even a detective might talk, and it

was safer and wiser to keep this cunning stroke of diplomacy altogether secret.

"There's nothing to worry about in all this," he said, "but in such things I don't believe in running chances. After next week—well, there won't be any need for you to keep an eye on young Dolliver. I've attended to that."

Noonan rose. "Then you want me to go on tailing him till then?"

"You might as well. But don't get the idea that I'm doing any worrying about him." Plimsoll chuckled. "I'm not, and if I were, I'd stop doing it next week. I've attended to that."

Noonan nodded. "Well," he said, moving toward the door, "I guess by that time it'll suit me all right to get back on the regular job again. There's some kick tailing Gilly, but for a steady diet I'd sooner work on the other lads. It ain't much fun tailing a bird from the Y. M. C. A. to the public libr'y and back, but it gives me a chance to do some sleeping nights and be awake daytimes."

"Getting too soft for night work, eh?" Plimsoll spoke sympathetically. Noonan did, in fact, exhibit symptoms of fatigue and Plimsoll was opposed on principle to overtime labor.

"It ain't that so much," said the detective. "I wouldn't care when I did my sleeping only for Eileen. Daytime's all the chance I got to stick around with her and you got to keep right on the job, steady, to stay buddies with 'em."

"That's so. Well, after next week you'll be able to do it. You can count on that." Plimsoll grinned. "You can write it on your cuff."

Noonan went out. In the corridor he adjusted his hat to the correct angle of professional insouciance

and, after his habit when deeply meditative, rolled his cigar slowly from the right corner of his mouth to its extreme left.

Belden Plimsoll devoted some moments to meditation as intent as Mr. Noonan's. He was quite sure that he was right about Lollie. The photograph beamed soft reassurance that there was no basis for concern or precaution. Albertine's wild, hysterical accusations of heartless, calculating selfishness fell of their own weight before the fond, honest smile that looked out from the gilt frame. Poor Noonan's idea that Lollie felt something kindlier than pity for Gilbert Dolliver was even more absurd.

Between these opposite extremes of error Belden Plimsoll knew that he stood solidly on the golden mean of common sense and fact. He was sure of it. Positive. And yet . . . suppose there were one chance in a million, in ten million, that Noonan was right? There was no harm in taking precaution against even the most ridiculously remote possibility, in such a case as this.

Plimsoll's hand moved decisively to the button that actuated the rubber-tired mechanism of his secretary. Without looking up he flung toward the doorway the curt order for which Gifford seemed to yearn.

"Send in those Class C men at twelve-fifty."

Gifford appeared to snatch the command and fold it passionately to his breast. Plimsoll arrested the reversing movement of the soundless gears.

"My daughter's lunching with me. Send her right in when she comes."

The door closed upon Gifford. Plimsoll allowed himself to smile contentedly at the photograph. There were fathers who thought it enough to put dangerous

playthings out of their children's reach. There was at least one who substituted toys that were at once more fascinating and—completely—safe!

Upon this father the framed photograph of an ideal daughter seemed to smile in understanding and in loving gratitude.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ALTHOUGH he refrained from needless joggings of Fate's elbow, Mr. B. Clifford Greminger was quite aware of Destiny's partiality toward those who help themselves. No moss whatever grew on Mr. Greminger's broad back, no grass-blade flourished under his generously proportioned foot, and the early worm, in his vicinity, enjoyed no security at all.

It was not yet noon when his car stopped at Mrs. Dolliver's door, but he was already acquainted with several interesting and useful facts concerning her, including a comprehensive knowledge of her late husband's will. Mr. Greminger's heart was light, as was his step, and the gleam of his golden molars did not darken as he received the intelligence that Mrs. Dolliver was still meditating and that her son had not yet risen from his bed.

Mr. Greminger possessed in marked degree the gift of getting on with colored people. In the course of his conversation with Zenia he not only gained much useful information concerning her employer, but he left behind him, when he waddled briskly back to his car, an admiring partisan and friend.

He drove, now, across to the South End, a purlieu less likely than Elmwood Park to contain a prospect predestined to possess a park, a garden or an estate in Paradise Heights Manor, but, in these days of sudden money, by no means a sterile soil for Mr. Greminger's tilling.

He had not been disheartened by the discovery, at

the Bureau of Motor Licenses, that one of last night's visitors to Paradise Heights now dwelt on the South End flats; he was not dismayed by the unimpressive exterior of the frame cottage at which he stopped, nor by the fact that its mistress, answering his ring in person, had manifestly been interrupted in active and personal performance of household labors, and regarded him, at first, with the eye of indurated sales resistance.

"In the high-grade end of the subdivision game," Mr. Greminger was in the habit of informing apprentice players of this kingly sport, "you gotta learn to use your pers'nality on 'em." This process he now employed in respect to Mrs. Noonan, disarming and charming her from her original attitude of defensive suspicion.

He made haste, however, slowly. He did not acquaint Mrs. Noonan with the nature of the errand upon which he sought her husband, but he so far persuaded her of its urgency that, twisting her apron between reluctant fingers, she admitted the possibility of overtaking Mr. Noonan, since the matter pressed so heavily, at the office of the adding machine works.

Mr. Greminger now made haste more swiftly. He drew breath contentedly as his eye was presently rewarded by the reassuring license number of the dusty small sedan parked before the office building of the Intercontinental plant. He shut off his engine but did not descend from his seat. Here, patiently, he waited for the quarry.

His eye fixed itself upon the door so narrowly that he paid no heed to the car that swerved in swiftly through the gates and, spurning the bluestone under impatient tires, rounded the oval to pause behind him. It was only as she danced lightly up the steps to the

doorway and thus intruded upon his field of vision that Mr. Greminger became interested in the driver of this car.

The degree of his interest, however, atoned for the delay. He sat up straight, inbreathing deeply.

"The little lady!" he said under his reverent breath. "And I suppose there's a lot of thickheads that would call a thing like that juss a quincidence!"

He lowered himself blithely to the drive and waddled with despatch to the door. Destiny had brought his path across that of the little lady, but it was up to him to find out for himself her name and the department in which she worked. He was in time to point her out, as she vanished into a corridor, to a blasé boy on guard at the outer gate. Upon him, too, Mr. Greminger used his personality. The boy grinned scornfully but without hostility.

"Her? Works here? Say, that's a hot one! That's the old man's daughter."

Mr. Greminger removed his hat. His face was illumined with the awed rapture of faith vindicated and rewarded beyond all hope.

"B. V. Plimsoll's daughter," he said softly. "And *still* there's people that'd call it juss a quincidence!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WITHIN the spirit of Belden Plimsoll abode peace and joy and honest pride. The pleasant private dining room on the top floor of the building, the quiet luxury of the table, the china and silver and the perfection of the service and the food invariably afforded him a grateful sense of achievement and possession, but today this feeling was amplified and enhanced by far more convincing evidence than inanimate objects could possibly submit.

The daughter who faced him over the gleaming oval of mahogany was at the focus of this intenser glow. This present Lollie, of flesh and blood, eagerly, vividly alive, was nearer to perfection than she had ever seemed in her father's fancy or her own photographs. She was real and she was perfect.

For this Belden Plimsoll needed no opinion but his own, of course, but there was corroboration for that judgment, had he required it, a quadruple and unanimous corroboration furnished by the faces and the voices of four younger men, men who, since Providence had not seen fit to provide Plimsoll with a son, came as near to perfection as could be expected of male youth.

Plimsoll had a dim belief, too, that their presence was in some infinitesimal degree responsible for the superperfection now exhibited by Lollie. All young men seemed to exert, to some extent, this ennobling influence; it could not be mere accident that in the presence of male contemporaries Lollie was always more completely an ideal daughter than in the absence of

such witnesses. Today, charmed and delighted by a Lollie who visibly adored him, who addressed him repeatedly as Daddy and who seemed, by glance and tone, to invite the four young men to join her in admiring him, Plimsoll honorably conceded them the minute share of credit that was their due.

Messrs. Averey, Saltonstall and Westgate admirably observed their becoming habit of leaving the conversation respectfully to their elders and their betters. For that matter, Mr. Jarrett betrayed only occasional signs of his unfortunate inclination toward lippiness, and even Belden Plimsoll chose to abdicate in favor of his daughter his rightful privilege and duty of conducting and controlling the table talk.

He was content to do this; it was more agreeable to give ear to this Lollie than to the inevitably stimulating sound of his own voice. He beamed happily at her across the table, regretting only that Albertine and Noonan could not listen with their own ears to this new proof of the fellowship of confidence and understanding that existed between this daughter and her sire.

For Lollie's talk, from the moment of her entry upon the conference between her father and these four young men, had dealt merrily and frankly with last night's excursion, and she had told the story, step for step, in exact conformity with Noonan's version. She had, however, made it funny, so funny that even Mr. Westgate, who was not lightly moved to mirth, was thrice impelled to smile and once to laugh.

"You ought to know Gilbert Dolliver," said Lollie, addressing Mr. Westgate. "He's just too perfectly marvelous." She sighed. "I'm positively cow-eyed about Gilbert."

Four pairs of eyes twitched obliquely to observe the

effect of this confession upon Plimsoll, and, reassured by his indulgent grin, four earnest faces relaxed to take the speech as humorous. Mr. Jarrett yielded to his besetting weakness.

"He's the fellow who claims to be the reincarnation of Buddha, isn't he?"

He spoke as one who deals tolerantly with illusion; there was also in his voice and manner a hint, perhaps, of depreciation. This Dolliver, he seemed to imply, was no doubt amusing in his harmless way, but hardly, after all, a suitable escort and comrade for a young lady. Lollie's glance cooled, for a moment, as it flickered to Mr. Jarrett's smile, but almost instantly it brightened again.

"I've never heard him claim that—not in just so many words," she said, as if, loyally defending a friend, she was compelled to be strictly truthful.

"Well, I've heard, pretty reliably, that he does claim it," said Jarrett. "I heard just yesterday that he's going over to India to——"

Again, more perceptibly, Lollie's expression congealed. This time, however, it was toward her father that her eyes flickered.

"I hope he doesn't go," she said. "I'd be simply *desolate* if I didn't have Gilbert to play with."

Once more, with slight evidences of consternation, four glances shifted sidewise to consult Belden Plimsoll's facial reaction to this forthright admission; once more he reassured them.

"It's an interesting religion—that transmigration theory." Jarrett glanced at Plimsoll and appeared to detect in the slight hardening of eye and mouth the proper view to adopt. "There was a course in Comparative Religions at college in which they studied the Buddhist cult pretty thoroughly, and if it hadn't con-

flicted with Money and Banking I'd have elected it, because I've always been interested in finding out how any rational human being can possibly think he——"

"It's always seemed a perfectly fascinating thought to me," said Lollie. "I think it's just thrilling to believe you used to be somebody else."

She spoke to Jarrett but her glance slanted watchfully at her father. All four young men exhibited signs of astonishment and of politely controlled dismay.

"It's so reasonable," Lollie urged. "It's such a perfectly plausible way to account for people like Shakespeare and Napoleon and——" her gaze enlarged to fond worshipfulness—"and Daddy!"

"Oh, come, Lollie!" Plimsoll laughed. "Don't make fun of me in public. These boys will think——"

"Don't you think——" Lollie appealed to all four of them—"don't *you* think my Daddy must have been somebody perfectly marvelous? Like Julius Caesar or William the Conqueror or——"

Plimsoll laughed again. In private a man could enjoy this sort of thing but with four pairs of alien eyes upon him it made him feel uneasy, almost ridiculous.

"Is that the best you can do?" he said. "Where do those fellows qualify——?"

"That's so," Lollie agreed. "I guess they weren't wise enough, were they? You must have been Socrates, Daddy. Or——" her eyes narrowed slightly—"or Machiavelli."

Plimsoll pushed back his chair. This had gone far enough. If it went on the four young men would begin to think Lollie was just teasing him. His nod made them free to depart, and three of them, in semi-military fashion, bowed stiffly to Lollie and to Plimsoll and moved toward the door. Jarrett, however,

lingered to indulge again in his regrettable tendency toward needless speech.

"It's been a great pleasure," he said. "I'd certainly like to talk to you some more about Buddhism, Miss Plimsoll. I've always wanted to find out just what the idea is—I'd have taken that course in Comparative Religions if it hadn't conflicted with a really important subject like Money and Banking, and I'd certainly like to have that transmigration theory explained to me by somebody who really knows."

"If you're really interested——" Lollie paused. Earnestly Mr. Jarrett assured her that his curiosity was vehement and sincere.

"Then it wouldn't be worth while to talk to me about it," said Lollie. "I don't know anything. What you'd better do is hunt up Gilbert Dolliver and ask him to explain it to you."

Slightly chopfallen Mr. Jarrett promised to do just this. Plimsoll glanced after him with compassion. Jarrett had more spunk than the others. He was the only one of the four who had shown courage and initiative enough to attempt, at least, to capitalize the shining opportunity afforded by this luncheon.

"Didn't you see that he was just fishing for an invitation?" Plimsoll chuckled. Young people, even such young people as Lollie, could be singularly obtuse about some things.

"Oh, do you really think so?" Lollie was manifestly startled by the suggestion. Again her father permitted himself to chuckle.

"You don't think he wanted to talk to you about Comparative Religions, do you?"

Lollie's lips flattened for an instant.

"Yes," she said. "I think that's exactly what he'd do."

Plimsoll smiled. Young people were certainly dense, some times. It had been altogether evident to him that Jarrett's interest, if any, in the topic of Buddhism, was a secondary matter, and yet Lollie, clever as she was about most things, had failed to perceive this. He felt, too, that she was not kindly disposed toward Jarrett. Probably she had noticed and disliked that tendency toward lippiness, which was, after all, rather a trivial defect in a young man otherwise admirable. He might manage to drop a hint about it, diplomatically, to the boy.

Glancing at Lollie he saw that she had forgiven Jarrett; she was smiling, now, in the soft, happy fashion that always made her father think of angels, and he wondered wistfully what had wrought the change in her look, what innocent and kindly thought was behind that smile. It did not occur to him as among possible causes that Lollie might perhaps be thinking about a meeting between Jarrett and Gilbert Dolliver, a meeting at which Jarrett should follow her advice and ask Gilbert to tell him about Buddha.

"I'll go out to the door with you," he said, loath to part with her. Under his tread the cork carpet felt almost pneumatic. Lollie, however, seemed less perfectly content. Her brows drew together; her glance slanted at her father with speculative gravity.

"You don't mind my seeing so much of Gilbert, do you?"

Plimsoll's cup overflowed. Here was the real Lollie! It had just occurred to her that her impulsive, tender-hearted kindness to poor young Dolliver might have caused her father some uneasiness of mind. She was offering, by implication, to drop the acquaintance if he wished it. For an instant Plimsoll was tempted to accept that offer, but only for an instant. He

realized that this was what an ordinary father would do, the short-sighted, narrow-visioned error of a little mind.

"Of course not!" He laughed.

The line deepened between Lollie's eyebrows. She looked almost disappointed, but her father was not misled; she was only puzzled, of course.

"I thought you didn't like him," she said. "You told mother he was a——"

"I was a bit excited," Plimsoll said hastily, averting a verbatim quotation which as a father he would be obliged to disapprove and which, as author, he ought logically to defend. "I haven't anything against the boy. I'm sorry for him and I'm not surprised that you are. It's kind of you to be nice to him."

Lollie's mouth opened but she did not speak. Again her father, if he had been an ordinary man, would have fancied that she was not pleased, but Plimsoll, of course, knew better. She was merely startled to discover this new evidence of his remarkable broad-mindedness. He had, now, one of those flashes of inspiration that came to him so often in his business dealings.

"I hope you'll keep it up till he goes," he said.

Lollie's mouth closed. For a moment her father fancied dimly that in the look she fixed upon him there was something of the exasperated and hostile respect he had viewed in the faces of out-generaled competitors. They arrived at the doorway of the reception room. Here, rising from a chair outside the railing, a plump man displayed all his teeth in golden witness to amazement and delight.

Lollie uttered a low, cooing sound of gladness.

"Why—Mis-ter—Greminger!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A SLIGHT but visible quivering, like the ecstatic shiver of a dog about to be patted, of a bowl of jelly lightly jarred, passed through the plump man's looming bulk.

"Iss the little lady!" His voice was awe-struck. "Didn't I tell you? Didn't I say, lass night——"

His glance moved on to Plimsoll and speech perished on his lips. His head was already bare, but in his look there was the unmistakable suggestion that he uncovered it again with reverence and rapture.

"This is Mr. Greminger, Daddy." Lollie's creamy voice seemed to dance. "The gentleman who owns the perfectly darling house I saw last night." She turned. "I suppose you know my father already, don't you? Everybody in Lakeport seems to."

Mr. Greminger achieved a bow. Visibly he swallowed; his tongue endeavored to stimulate lips that were for once unequal to their duty. He put forth an unsteady hand.

"I never had the pleasure of shaking hands with you before, Mr. Plimsoll, but we had some corr'spondence, four-five years back, about that piano plant——"

As if warned by some change in Plimsoll's look he hastily abandoned the topic. He turned to Lollie, his head oscillating solemnly on a bearing of successive chins.

"And me showing this little lady over my model house out at Paradise Heights lass night, without

dreaming she was——" he gulped—"B. V. Plimsoll's daughter!"

His cheek clicked against the golden molars.

"How did you find out?" Lollie asked. "Or is this just one of those coinci——"

"Don't say it!" Mr. Greminger's hand rose. "Don't say it! I came in here to—to see a man I've got business with and——" he stopped and turned to Plimsoll. "I don't know how you look at it, Mr. Plimsoll, but I don't believe a thing like this could be juss a quincidence. No, sir. I don't dope life out that way. You take lass night—I don't know if the little lady's told you about how she and—and the boy-friend ran outa gas, right in front of Paradise Heights——"

"She told me," said Plimsoll. It gave him a mild satisfaction to impress even Mr. Greminger with this proof of the degree to which he enjoyed his daughter's confidence.

"Well, I leave it to you if things could happen like that if they weren't *meant* to happen. Or a thing like me walking in here juss now, without the leass idea I was going to see the little lady and——" he paused—"and shake hands with Belden V. Plimsoll! Only lass night I was telling her and the boy-friend how I doped things out——"

"Yes. She's just been telling me," Plimsoll interrupted. Mr. Greminger's cheek and teeth clicked reverently.

"Juss think of it! Me never dreaming I was saying something that'd get repeated inside of twenty-four hours to——" his voice dropped a tone—"to B. V. Plimsoll himself! Juss think of it!"

Mr. Greminger's pers'nality, although employed without intention, was again in use. In the face of his evident conviction that he had met, had shaken hands

and was now in actual conversation with deity, it was impossible for Belden Plimsoll, splendidly sales-resistant though he was, to remain unmoved. He smiled.

"I'm afraid that anything anybody tells my little girl is pretty likely to be handed along to me."

The little girl glanced at him quickly and thoughtfully. Mr. Greminger wagged his head.

"Did she tell you about the house I showed her? Did she tell you about the kind of a homesite prop'sition we're offering out at Paradise Heights Manor Park Gardens Estates?" He settled smoothly into accustomed eloquence. "Right on the top of the hill, fourteen minutes from here, on the new Egandale Road. Concrete gutters and sidewalks, paved roads, sewer and water and electricity on the prop'ty and a model house ready to move into this minute, a house——"

"My daughter told me about it," said Plimsoll.

"She couldn't of! Not even the little lady! Nobody could tell you about this house, Mr. Plimsoll. I couldn't do it myself. Iss a house thass got to be looked at. But I'll say that iss one place where you'd be satisfied to have your daughter live. Yes, sir—and I say that knowing how a man like you would feel about that. Yes, sir—I been in the high-class subdivision game for nineteen years and I've found out the kind of a place a man like you would build for a daughter like the little lady!"

He sobered suddenly. "I'll bet it was meant! I'll bet thass why I picked out the place and why I put up the kind of a model house you wouldn't find in another subdivision in the state! Yes, sir! I must of been *meant* to——" He paused. "Look, Mr. Plimsoll, my car's right out front. Lemme run you and the

little lady out to Paradise Heights right now and show you——"

"No." Lollie intervened with finality. The exalted look dimmed slightly in the plump man's face.

"We mustn't keep my father away from his work any longer just now," Lollie explained. "I've taken up a simply frightful lot of his time."

Plimsoll's heart swelled. Here was a daughter! Thinking of him, of his comfort and convenience, sparing him even the trivial task of getting rid of this buzzing land-peddler! He was so happy that he could even be sorry for Greminger.

"But I'd love to go out with you myself," said Lollie, "and see that darling house again by daylight."

The joy disfiguring Mr. Greminger's face became almost holy. Again the bowl of jelly quivered. Walking beside Lollie toward the door, Mr. Greminger appeared to float, a large bubble buoyantly inflated with delight.

Plimsoll himself trod lightly enough as he went back to his desk. The agreeable sensation of being right had no novelty for him, but it gave him, in this instance, a peculiar satisfaction.

Lollie's essential kindness of heart explained everything, the kindness that couldn't bear to disappoint that gold-toothed fat man, the kindness that took pity even on Gilbert Dolliver. He smiled affectionately back at the photograph and plunged happily into his work.

At the new house in Paradise Heights Mr. Greminger, however, found himself wasting eloquence upon inattentive ears. Miss Plimsoll seemed to be thinking about other matters than brass hot-water pipes and copper gutters. Her face, even as these things were urged upon her notice, did not lighten; it

was thoughtfully somber, as if brass hot-water pipes displeased her. Mr. Greminger sought for a more cheering theme. He had been in the high-class subdivision game for nineteen years.

"Iss lucky you came by here before I got the furniture picked out," he said. "Everybody's got their own ideas about how a house ought to be furnished and maybe mine wouldn't of suited you. Now when you look at this room, f'r instance, you see it the way it'll look when you got your own things in it, instead of seeing it with the kind of furniture I'd of picked out, and——"

Miss Plimsoll looked up with signs of quickened interest.

"Do you mean that you were going to furnish it before you knew who was going to buy it? Wouldn't that be running a risk that——"

"You gotta run plenty of risks in the high-class devel'pment game, these days. You gotta show 'em a model house all ready to live in—rugs on the floor, pictures on the wall, magazines on the table. You take the ordinary home-buyer, Miss Plimsoll, and they can't visu'lize like you and me. If a thing isn't there, they can't see it. There isn't one in a thousand that could walk in here like you did lass night and see yellow muslin curtains hanging up over that landing window."

"Scrim," said Lollie. "Cream scrim."

"I meant scrim," said Mr. Greminger. He paused. Slowly there overspread his face the look of one who listens raptly to the voice of inspiration.

"Look here, Miss Plimsoll, how'd you like to go ahead and furnish this house juss the way you want it? I gotta furnish it if you don't buy it, anyway, and I'd sooner have it the way you want it, because I—well, you know how I look at things. I dope it out that if

you hadn't of been meant to live here one these days your boy-friend wouldn't of run outa gas right there, lass night, and when I got a hunch like that I play it to the limit. You go ahead and——"

"But——"

"You don't have to say it. I know. You're going to tell me you can't guarantee to buy the place. You don't have to. There aren't any strings to this prop'-sition. You go ahead and fix the house up juss the way you want it. If you buy it, the furniture gess tacked right on to the price. If you don't buy it, somebody else'll get juss that much better furnished a home, that's all. Either way it'll be absolutely oke by me, absolutely oke. I was going to spend around four thousand on it myself. I know that'd hardly fix it up swell enough for you and I'll go as high as six. How about it?"

Lollie shook her head, but some reflection of his radiance glimmered in her face. Again he was inspired.

"I'll tell you why I want you to do it," he said, lowering his voice confidentially. "I'm thinking about the effect it'd have on your father. Juss think, Miss Plimsoll, what a surprise it'd hand him if you could bring him out here, one these days, and show him this house fixed up juss the way you want it! Juss think what it'd mean to him to come out here and see your little love-ness all furn——"

"I've thought," said Lollie. Not even Belden Plimsoll himself could have spoken with more definite decision; not even Mr. Greminger, for all his advantage in the matter of facial area, could have looked as utterly, raptly glad.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

AND Lollie didn't see that the poor chap was just trying to fish for an invitation!"

Plimsoll laughed heartily. He was in high, happy spirits, spirits that had risen steadily through a dinner hour of placid harmony, with Lollie smiling softly under his good-natured, paternal raillery, exactly as she smiled upon him from the photograph, a Lollie so completely and unmistakably what a daughter should be that her father wondered why Albertine did not perceive this and rejoice with him.

He did his best to banish the worried line from between Albertine's eyebrows by showing her how absurdly little cause there was for it, by proving to her—lately a dangerous experiment but tonight brilliantly successful—that the daughter who sat between them could even be teased.

At his allusion, however, to young Mr. Jarrett's unsuccessful strategy, Albertine's anxiety seemed to increase, and the glance she turned briefly upon her daughter was eloquent of apprehension.

"She thought——" he chuckled again—"she thought he really wanted to talk to her about Buddhism! You ought to have heard her, Teenie—advising him to ask Gilbert Dolliver about it!"

Albertine still failed to see the humor of it. Her troubled frown became more definite than ever, in spite of the fact that Lollie herself joined softly in her father's mirth.

Plimsoll persisted. He was determined, now, to

make Albertine laugh. He described Mr. Greminger so comically that again Lollie giggled. Her mother, however, was moved only to shocked protest.

"I never *heard* of such a thing! Going about making people think you're engaged to that horrible boy! Looking at *houses!* I don't see anything funny about it, Belden!"

"Well, Lollie and I do, don't we?"

Plimsoll twinkled at his daughter. Lollie giggled once more. She rose, now, and sauntered away. Slightly muted by distance the snort and thump of radio jazz came from the library, affording cover for plain speech between her parents.

"What's the matter now, Teenie? What's the use of looking as if you were afraid the roof was going to fall on you any minute? Can't you see that she's all right again?"

"Butter just wouldn't melt in her mouth," said Albertine, in the voice of one who points out an ominous symptom. "She even let you get away with that perfectly inane talk about Mr. Jarrett. She must be up to something simply awful!"

Plimsoll sighed impatiently.

"Honestly, Teenie! First, you're all stirred up because she's hateful to you and then you're scared to death because she isn't! Yesterday you were accusing her of deliberately trying to make us quarrel and today——"

"It isn't natural," Albertine interrupted, as if she hadn't heard. "Letting you tell me, right in front of her, that she didn't know what Mr. Jarrett was driving at!"

"But she didn't! I was right there. It was perfectly obvious that she thought he only wanted to find out about Buddhism."

"Yes. And it was just sweet of her, wasn't it, to advise him to ask Gilbert Dolliver about it?" Albertine shook her head wearily. "Of course she didn't know what happens if anybody just mentions that word to Gilbert!"

Plimsoll stared. The circumstances, he saw, permitted this interpretation, but it was hardly believable that gentle, sweet-minded Albertine, should go out of her way to put the worst possible construction on what must have been an innocent, well-meaning error of Lollie's.

More clearly than ever he realized again that all the late disquiet of his home was due, not to Lollie, but to her mother. It had been Albertine who had told him Lollie wanted to leave home and study dancing in New York. It had been Albertine, last night, who had flared up about Pansy Dolliver, and then, absurdly, tried to lay the blame at Lollie's door. It was Albertine, now, who saw in her daughter's smiling good-humor only a proof that she was again plotting against her parents' peace of mind.

He did not allow himself to be angry about this. Albertine was a person ruled by reflexes. She didn't reason and it was worse than useless to argue with her unless one went about it as if arguing with a stubborn child. This, very kindly and patiently, her husband now proceeded to attempt.

"Let's go over the whole thing calmly," he proposed, "and see just what it amounts to. You think that Lollie wants to get away from home—that she's set her heart on going to New York to study dancing, and that she's using this Dolliver boy simply to scare us into letting her go. Well, let's suppose you're right. What of it?"

Albertine arched her eyebrows.

"You don't care? You're willing to let her——?"

He smiled. "Of course not! I don't believe she has any idea of doing it and if she had, it wouldn't do her any good. I'm just trying to make you understand that there's nothing to worry about. Suppose she is going about with Gilbert just to worry us, what does it matter?"

"Matter! Doesn't it matter to you if your daughter's driving about every night with that horrible boy, asking about ministers and pretending to look at *houses?* Don't you care whether——"

"I care just this much. I care just enough to have taken a good deal of trouble and spent quite a bit of money simply to make absolutely sure that she won't do any more driving with that young man after next Thursday. I don't believe for a minute that she's doing it to annoy us; I've got too much respect for her to be afraid of her liking that kind of a boy. I think she's sorry for him and that his particular brand of imbecility amuses her a little, but what I'm trying to make you realize just now is that I'm not the haphazard, hit-or-miss brand of father. I look after my daughter more carefully than I look after my business. I didn't think Gilbert Dolliver was very dangerous, but I've attended to him, haven't I? Well, you can depend on me to keep right on attending to anybody or anything that might harm Lollie."

Albertine was silent. He fancied that he had succeeded in convincing her at last.

"I'm not worried about Gilbert—not specially," she said, after a thoughtful pause. "I don't believe she'd ever care much about him, even if he goes to India, but——"

"If?" Plimsoll justly resented the implied doubt of his executive ability. "Don't you think he'll go?"

He was startled, as he spoke, to discover how confidently he had been counting on Gilbert's going, how frightened he felt at the mere suggestion of Gilbert's staying at home.

"Well," said Albertine, "I guess he'll go if Pansy does. He wouldn't dare breathe if she told him not to. It's just sickening to see a full-grown man tied to his mother's apron-strings like that!"

"Pansy? Why, Pansy's been simply crazy to go for months. You ought to have seen her when I told her she could have the money!"

"Yes. But I'm never terribly sure about Pansy Dolliver. She's the hen-minded sort of woman—she wants something desperately till she gets it and then she wants something else." Albertine paused, as if to sharpen a spear-point. "Of course you know her so well that she may have told you just how she feels about Cousin Arthur Timlow, but I've been wondering whether she mightn't weaken about going off to India when it was time to start. She's kept him dangling for so long that she might miss him if——"

"Timlow! Why, he—why, I never heard anything so absolutely idiotic! Arthur Timlow! Why, Pansy wouldn't——"

Albertine merely laughed. She rose from the table, wearing the peculiarly irritating aspect of superior knowledge that Plimsoll had learned, exasperatedly, to respect. In these matters Albertine was often right.

He lingered, thinking hard, over cigarette and coffee. Arthur Timlow had been staidly enamored of Pansy Mole, back in those days when far better men had lost their heads about her, and Arthur hadn't married, either. Yes, and he'd always hung about her a good deal. Plimsoll could remember having seen him, only last month, carrying an armful of packages

out of a store, at Pansy's side, and looking as if he liked it.

Yes. Albertine might be right. She was certainly right about Pansy, who had never known her own mind in her life and who never wanted anything very long after she got it—not even such a priceless possession as young Belden Plimsoll himself.

He thought it over deliberately. Suddenly, as light came to him, he laughed. If Albertine happened to be right about this thing, so much the better!

He strolled into the library, now wholly at peace with himself. Lollie had switched off the radio and was smoking thoughtfully, looking remarkably long and slim and flat in the horizontal position she had taken upon the divan. She smiled absently at her father, but, as he lowered himself to the deep welcome of his favorite chair, she sobered and sat up, inspecting him with a curious attention.

"That's an awfully comfortable chair, isn't it, father?"

"The only one I ever found that was just right." He sighed contentedly.

"Do you remember where you bought it, mother?"

"Ganley's, I think," said Albertine without lifting her eyes from her magazine. Lollie sighed.

"I suppose it must have cost a frightful lot, then, didn't it?"

"Two or three hundred. I don't remember." There was now a definite suggestion, in Albertine's tone, that she did not care to be interrupted by idle questions. Lollie's glance moved deliberately toward her and Plimsoll observed that it hardened slightly. He felt that Lollie had a right to be hurt; Albertine oughtn't to have rebuffed that innocent inquiry. Children

should be encouraged to ask questions of their parents without having to stop and weigh their relevancy.

When you came right down to facts, most of the recent fussing must have been Albertine's fault. Certainly it wasn't Lollie's. She was doing her best to make conversation. He beamed at her, but she did not see the benignant grin; her glance was fixed on her mother.

"It would be cheaper, wouldn't it, if it wasn't covered with that velours? Wouldn't be just as comfortable in denim, or something cheaper?"

Albertine put down her reading. She turned so that she faced Lollie.

"Why are you so interested in furniture all of a sudden?"

Her voice was sharp, almost hostile. No wonder, Plimsoll thought, that Lollie resented it.

"I'm sorry, mother. I didn't realize how disgraceful it was of me to be interested in such a suspicious thing as a chair, but of course I can see how it looks to you!"

She rose. Her lips quivered slightly, giving her the faint likeness to Albertine that was usually invisible. Swiftly and yet with wounded dignity, she moved out of the room. Her feet sounded on the stairs with a curious suggestion of tears.

"That was absolutely your fault, Teenie!" Plimsoll spoke with just severity. "The child asked you a perfectly natural question."

"About furniture!" Albertine's lips drew tight. "She's seen that chair of yours a thousand times without thinking or caring what it cost or where it came from. She's been acting that way ever since she came home! She asked me where I had my curtains made and how much they cost, and she must have known I

was listening when she was talking to Ellen about the linoleum in the kitchen! And she deliberately waited till you came in here, just now, to ask me about that chair!"

For some reason wholly invisible to her husband Albertine now gave evidence of impending grief. The ominous trembling of her under lip was singularly and unpleasantly identical with the quiver that Plimsoll had observed on Lollie's. He stared.

"She's keeping it up," said Albertine. "Don't you see? Can't you understand that she's going to keep on trying to worry us till we let her have her way about going to New York?"

"But she hasn't said a word about going to New York! Not a word!"

"That just proves it! If she talked about it I wouldn't be so worried! But she hasn't even mentioned it since day before yesterday!"

Plimsoll shook his head, helpless before this magnificent contempt of logic.

"First it's looking for a minister with Gilbert Dolliver and then it's looking at houses with him, and now it's curtains and lin——" a sob—"oleum!"

"Stop it!" Plimsoll spoke sharply. "You're making it all up! You've made it up from the beginning! There's absolutely nothing to it except your hysterical, unjust, unmotherly——"

He stopped. Albertine, almost exactly duplicating the wounded dignity of Lollie's withdrawal, left the room. Her feet pattered, precisely as Lollie's had pattered, on the stairs. Her door closed.

Belden Plimsoll shook his head. He swung about, presently, to the consolation of the radio. A mellow voice, quivering with good-will, streamed out to comfort him.

"And the next selection, ladies and gentlemen of the radio audience, in this wonderful treat we are enjoying through the kindness of the De Luxe Exverminating Company, Exverminators to the Elite, will be your old favorite, The End of a Perfect Day, played by Hermie Krauss on his big bassoon!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

UPON the finely intellectual face of Cousin Arthur Timlow was the look of righteous indignation with which, Belden Plimsoll told himself, all such predestined losers in the game of life regard their failures.

It was characteristic of men like Arthur Timlow to blame everybody except themselves when things went wrong, just as it was characteristic of successful men like Plimsoll to realize that when a man falls down it is his own fault and only his own.

Plimsoll knew, without need of words, that in this matter of the piano factory, Cousin Arthur, as usual, had fallen down; he knew, too, that he would be obliged to listen, even to feign sympathy, while Cousin Arthur set forth the injustice and chicane of which he had been the innocent victim. He was also reasonably certain that another trifling loan would presently be negotiated. In spite of all these considerations, however, he made Mr. Timlow warmly welcome, and in this he was wholly sincere.

Overnight Cousin Arthur had acquired value and importance. He was a piece in the chess game that Plimsoll played, a pawn only, perhaps, but like a pawn, capable of becoming the most powerful piece on the board, of deciding the issue between defeat and victory.

"Hello, Arthur." Plimsoll spoke heartily. "Sit down and tell me the bad news. I can see you're sore about something."

"I have a right to be!" Cousin Arthur placed

stick and hat on the desk with the effect of a somber ritual. He seated himself; even in the act of twitching his trousers upward to protect their crease he gave the impression of solemnity and state.

"I found that the property was exactly what my friend wanted. He was so obviously delighted with the plans and photographs that I felt safe in quoting him your outside figure—one hundred thousand—and he was frank enough to say at once that he considered it reasonable. He was more enthusiastic, indeed, than I had been, and if it had not been for Herbert Dolliver——"

"Herb!" Plimsoll jumped. "Where does he come in?"

"I discover that he is the president and practically the owner of the company I hoped to deal with. I had no idea of this until Mr. Purley—he is the friend of whom I spoke, the vice-president of the company and a fine, high-minded gentleman in every way, Belden. I made his acquaintance in connection with Association for the Advancement of Cremation, in which, as you know, I take a deep interest and in which Mr. Purley is also active, and it was at a meeting of the executive committee that I first learned of his intention to establish a mid-western factory. I must say, though, that he might have been more candid with me. He did not say, to be sure, that he was in control of his concern, but he certainly permitted me to draw this inference and I spoke to him quite frankly about this. Quite frankly. I said to him: Mr. Purley, you——"

"Never mind about Purley. Tell me about Herb Dolliver?"

"As I was about to say when you interrupted me," Cousin Arthur's voice and look were gently reproachful, "it is Herbert Dolliver who owns and manages

the company. Mr. Purley is only an employee and his vice-presidency turns out to be merely nominal."

"Yes. And what did Herb——?"

"It will be better to let me give you my report in my own way," said Cousin Arthur. "I was exceedingly astonished when Mr. Purley took me into the office next to his own and I found Herbert Dolliver there. I was, I may say, astounded. And not at all pleased. I never held a high opinion of Herbert, and I have not forgiven him for the abominable way in which he has behaved to Pansy. I took him up quite sharply about it. Quite sharply indeed. I told him exactly what I thought of a man who would desert his brother's widow and her fatherless little boy! I used the word 'desert' advisedly, Belden. There may have been no legal responsibility upon Herbert, but the moral one is not debatable. A man who left town without even bidding his sister-in-law and his nephew good-bye, and who has never so much as let them know his address——"

"Well," said Plimsoll, "I'm glad you got all that off your chest, Arthur, but I can't say I'm astonished that you didn't sell Herb the plant."

"Oh, I controlled my private feelings until it was quite certain that there was no chance whatever of persuading Herbert to locate in Lakeport." Cousin Arthur's frown deepened. "I should have said nothing as to my opinions of his behavior to Pansy if he had not exasperated me beyond endurance by what he said about Lakeport. I hope I am above the insularity of those who will hear no word in criticism of their cities, but no man, in my hearing, may describe Lakeport as"—he nerved himself visibly for the effort—"as a one-toad puddle!"

Plimsoll sat up. "Did he say that? The——"

"He went on to say, further, that it wouldn't be even a one-toad puddle if the rest of the one toad was as swelled as his head! I admit, Belden, that I lost my temper, when he said that."

"I don't blame you!" Plimsoll discovered, below the heat of wrathful outrage, a warmer regard for Cousin Arthur. "I wish I'd been there to lose mine, too! A one-toad pud—why, I wouldn't sell that—that pin-headed mud-slinger a cemetery lot in this town, now! He couldn't have that factory for any money. We don't want his kind in this town. I never had any use for Herb, but now—why, the cheap, piccolo-playing——" he paused. "After all, what could you expect of a piccolo-player? That's all Herb Dolliver ever was or ever will be! I'll bet he's still playing a pic——"

"At any rate," said Cousin Arthur, "he manufactures that—uh—that instrument, among others. His firm is styled the Intercontinental Wood Wind Corporation."

"Inter——" Plimsoll choked. "He's had the impudence to use that name for a miserable little one-horse piccolo factory!"

"It would appear to be rather successful, as a business," said Cousin Arthur, reluctantly. "I must admit that I was impressed by its evident prosperity. I had no idea that so many people could be—uh—addicted to the piccolo. To be sure, though, Herbert manufactures a number of other instruments—flutes, clarionets, oboes and, let me see, ah, yes, of course—and bassoons!"

Bassoons! Plimsoll seemed to see the sinister gleam of Mr. Greminger's gold teeth, to hear him speaking gravely of quincidences that could not have happened unless of intention and by design. He freed himself

instantly, to be sure, of the childish fear the thought inspired, but its shadow lingered, a cold, unpleasant shadow.

"Well, we don't want any bassoon factories in Lakeport, or any Herb Dollivers, either. I'm glad you didn't put this deal across, Arthur."

"I——" Cousin Arthur hesitated. "I can share your feeling to a certain point, but I must own to some disappointment, nevertheless. I had counted on being able to discharge my—uh—obligations to you out of the—the emoluments, if I may use the word, accruing to me from the sale of the property."

"Oh, forget about that."

"And," Cousin Arthur continued, bowing to acknowledge Plimsoll's magnanimity, "I had also counted rather heavily on whatever balance might have come to me, over and above the amounts you have—uh—advanced. The fact is, Belden, that I find myself, well, to be quite candid, I am——"

"Broke," said Plimsoll. "All right. Maybe we can arrange that part of it, too." He leaned forward. "I—there's a position open in our Export Division. It would mean traveling a good deal, but not much else. Just dropping in at our foreign branches and making a confidential report to me about them. It would be a sort of secret, roving commission, as my personal agent. There wouldn't be any visible connection with the company, I mean. If you think it would suit you——"

"I should be glad," said Cousin Arthur, "to consider it. I may say that I should consider it quite seriously." He smiled. "It is an odd coincidence, Belden, but I have been wishing, of late, that circumstances would permit me to—uh—to travel." He

paused. "Should I be asked to follow any particular route, or could I select my own destination?"

"Eventually, if—if the arrangement proves satisfactory, you could go where you pleased," said Plimsoll, "but I should want you to start by taking the *Campestre,* next Thursday, to Marseilles, and to go on from there to Bombay."

"Dear me!" Cousin Arthur's eyebrows mounted high upon his imposing forehead. "Dear me! This is really most extraordinary, Belden! It was precisely this journey that I strongly desired to take! Precisely! It is, of course, merely a coincidence, but it tempts one to believe with the fatalists, that—that these things are—uh—are meant!"

He seemed to read the look that flickered across Plimsoll's face.

"I see," he said, "that the philosophy is distasteful to you."

"It is," said Plimsoll curtly. Somehow he seemed to be answering Mr. Greminger instead of Cousin Arthur. There was a grim satisfaction, though, in the thought that when quincidences were meant, it was somebody like Belden Plimsoll who meant them, somebody who laughed at the fell clutch of circumstance, who saw the blood-stained bludgeon of Chance as the stuffed club it truly was, somebody who, when there was work for Destiny, was big enough to do it himself and do it right!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ON MONDAY evening, within eighteen hours of the moment scheduled for departure on the pilgrimage to India, Mrs. Pansy Dolliver suffered one of her old heart attacks.

In cause, in symptoms and in treatment, this seizure corresponded very closely to those which had occurred quite frequently before Alfred Dolliver's death and before his wife had made her original escape from Error and Illusion.

It was caused, as they had been caused, by cruelty, but on this occasion the culprit was a son instead of a husband, a son who callously, stubbornly refused to heed the warning pressure of mama's hand upon her breast, a son who was as heartless and as obdurate as Alfred Dolliver had been when he had refused to discharge that horrid little stenographer who had impertinently tried to keep mama out of his office just because he was in conference with a client—a son who basely, obstinately refused to go to India with mama!

In symptoms, too, this attack was like those others. It took the form of lying flat upon the floor and pounding upon it with heels and clenched hands; it was accompanied by a gasping outcry, in the shrill, falsetto key of intolerable pain, an outcry consisting wholly of the statement that mama was about to die. The ignorant inability of physicians to correlate these symptoms with Mrs. Dolliver's heart had been a blessing in disguise, in that it had compelled her to abandon doctors and so led her into Light.

In point of treatment, however, the simple means by which Alfred Dolliver had so frequently saved mama's life were not immediately effective when Gilbert endeavored to employ them. All that it had been necessary for papa to do, when mama was having one of her attacks, was to promise her that he wouldn't be cruel to her any more, but when Gilbert offered this assurance mama continued to beat hands and heels against the floor and to declare, with anguish, that her heart was killing her.

"Now, now, mama. It's all right. I'll go, if I've got to."

"My heart!" mama sobbed. "I'm dying!"

"No, you aren't. It's all right. I'll go."

"You won't wear your chela robe, though! You're so cruel and selfish you won't do anything for me after all I've done for you! Oh, I'd better die! I want to die!"

The hammering recommenced. Gilbert had opened his mouth for the sacrifice, when the doorbell intervened. Its hum seemed to exert a remarkably curative effect on mama's heart. The floor-pounding ceased; mama sat up, rose, her hands ordering her hair. She could even smile, now, and Gilbert observed that her anguish had been too keen for tears.

"Run and answer the bell, Baby," she said, in quite her own voice. "I think it's Mr. Timlow."

Gilbert scowled. "That old pussy-face!"

"Baby!" Mama's hand rose to her breast. "Is that the way to speak of mama's friends? Is that a Christian—I mean, a Buddhist way to speak of poor, dear Mr. Timlow?"

"He makes me sick," stated Gilbert coarsely. "What's he hanging around here for? I'm almost glad we're going on this da—this pilgrimage. We'll get away from that old hand-kisser, anyway!"

"Why, he——" mama paused. "Go and let him in, Baby. You know Zenia won't pay any attention to the bell when we're in here."

Darkly Gilbert obeyed. From the porch a mellow boom reached in through the screen door.

"Well, Gil-l-l-bert!"

Mr. Timlow spoke as if the encounter amazed and delighted him. Gilbert replied with one of his briefer and less gracious coughs, and having led the visitor to the doorway of the living room, made a deft escape, unrebuked by mama, to the more congenial company, in the kitchen, of Zenia and her husband, Perfessor Fossit.

Toward the Perfessor Gilbert harbored a profound, abiding esteem, founded on the memory of his fourteenth birthday, when, in this same kitchen, Perfessor Fossit had sheared away the loathly curls and Gilbert had become, outwardly, as other men.

In Perfessor Fossit's presence it was still possible to recapture an afterglow of that deep, poignant rapture he had felt as the scissors snipped for the first time against his scalp. All other barbers stood high in his respect merely because their art associated them with the Perfessor.

Zenia's husband was liberally large and pear-shaped, sloping upward from the lower periphery of his white vest to the ebony luster of his naked pate. His chest and shoulders merged into the nethermost of his chins and the uppermost of these blended imperceptibly into a face of grave and weighty dignity, a countenance eminently in keeping with both of the Perfessor's callings—for he followed no less than two. For five days in the week he pursued the tonsorial arts; on the first he rested and on Saturdays he occupied the pulpit in the frame chapel of the Sevum-Day Sanctifi' Saints.

He bent upon Gilbert, now, the high, expostulatory gaze of this latter profession; he wagged the upper portion of the pear.

"What you been doin' iss time?" he inquired sternly. "Givin' you' mama one nem fits!"

"I didn't give it to her," said Gilbert, investigating the ice box. "She just *had* it."

"She ain' go' git one nem fits dess fo' fun," the Perfessor stated. "No *suh!* Any time she gits one nem hot tacks it mean you ain' been conduckin' you'se'f good." His voice dropped discreetly. "She fine out you been gittin' out nights, goin' roun' rollin' nem bones?"

Gilbert, pausing in the consumption of a chicken wing, glanced apprehensively in the direction of the living room. His mouth being at the moment preoccupied with the forbidden flesh food, he answered by a negative movement of his head.

"She goin' fine out, one nese nights, you keep on," Zenia prophesied darkly, "nen she goin' git a *real* fit!" She paused. "How you give huh iss one, Gilbutt?"

"I tell you she just had it! I didn't do anything. I just said I didn't want to go on this old pilgrimage, that's all."

There was a united protest from both Zenia and the Perfessor, who had been from the beginning warm advocates of the proposed Indian journey. The Perfessor, as authority for his position, quoted verbatim the Fifth Commandment.

"Well, my days won't be very long in this land if I do what she wants," said Gilbert. "And anyway I guess honoring your mother doesn't mean doing everything she tells you to, all your life, either."

He, too, had authority for his statement, but he did

not say so. He went on, however, to quote from the same source.

"Every person has to live their own life after they grow up," he said, "and that doesn't mean doing everything that somebody else tells them to. A grown up person doesn't have to mind their parents. I bet you didn't do it yourself when you were twenty-three years old."

"I dess bet I did!" The Perfessor spoke earnestly. "I try not mine'in my mama dess one time, when I older nat! One time plenty!"

"Why?" Gilbert was immediately interested. "Did she have a heart attack?"

"She take b'oom han'le an' lam me good! You' mama let you off easy, dess havin' one nem fits!"

Considered in relation to a broom handle the looming bulk of Perfessor Fossit became more imposing, more forbidding than ever, and Gilbert, gnawing at the remnant of the chicken bone, studied the portly figure in gloomy silence.

"Do you still do everything your mother tells you?" he inquired, as the result of dark cogitation.

"No, not no mo'," the Perfessor admitted. Gilbert brightened a little.

"Why not?"

"Because I ma'ied man now, 'at why."

"Married?" Gilbert echoed the word with strong disfavor. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Good Book say a ma'ied man boun' to fo'sake he papa an' mama an' cleaf strickly unto he wife. 'At whut Good Book say—*fo'sake!*"

Gilbert gave to this new aspect of the matter a few moments of deep consideration. He shook his head slowly and his knuckles rapped thrice on the friendly, protective wood of the ice box.

"I'd sooner go to India," he announced. Heartily Zenia and her husband applauded the decision, exchanging glances of relief and pleasure. The Perfessor pointed out a number of the joys of travel.

"Git nice long ride onnuh train nen go on gran' big boat!" He smacked his lips enviously. "See all lem poo' iggrunt Injuns, dess like free Wile Wess Show! My, my! Plenty people mighty glad to git a chance!"

Gilbert listened absent-mindedly, without outward signs of sharing the Perfessor's enthusiasm. He wore the look, rather, of one who chooses the lesser of two evils, and this expression curdled slightly when he was recalled to the living room in that one of mama's voices which he associated dimly with Mr. Timlow and therefore disliked, a voice of special flutiness and sweetness.

The shadow upon his face darkened as Mr. Timlow, taking leave, jack-knifed gallantly at the waist and lifted mama's fingers to his lips, and Gilbert permitted the screen door to slam, after the parting guest, with hearty emphasis. He received with a gloomy cough a soft, wistful reference on mama's part to Mr. Timlow's lovely manners.

"Beddy time, Baby," said mama fondly. To this Gilbert agreed with eagerness.

His mood, when he tiptoed down the back stairs, an hour later, was tinged with sadness. The privilege of being shadowed had been dulled a little by familiarity, but it quickened again as Gilbert went forth to enjoy it for the last time. There was a lump in his throat when he beheld the reflected glower, in the windshield, of the pursuing lights, and he discovered, rather to his astonishment, that he experienced a slight melancholy even in the act of bassooning for Lollie Plimsoll to come out for their last ride together.

Lollie herself was in high spirits, however, and her manifest friendliness affected Gilbert in two curiously different ways.

Last night, after a week of urgent persuasion and incitement, he had rashly stated that he positively wouldn't go to India, no matter what happened, and he knew that his present high standing in Lollie's esteem was due directly to that over-daring declaration. His surrender to the irresistible force of mama's heart attack had been necessary, and according to Perfessor Fossit it had been virtuous as well, and yet it now seemed to wear some aspects of shame, of basely broken faith, and Gilbert's conscience troubled him for accepting Lollie's admiring congratulations on pretenses wholly false.

On the other hand this suddenly intensified friendliness alarmed him. In their dancing-school days he had learned to dislike and distrust Lollie as an open enemy, singularly malicious and dangerously cunning. Their recent association had lessened this hostility and revealed a Lollie who was neither specially repugnant nor specially dangerous, a person whose company rather increased the fun of being shadowed and to whom he owed his lucky acquaintance with Mr. Fenstermacher and his consequent swift progress toward the mastery of the bassoon. Now, suddenly, he was aware of still another Lollie, a Lollie no longer malevolent and yet somehow more to be feared than ever.

From this Lollie he discreetly withheld his confidence as he drove out along the Egandale road, answering only with non-committal coughs her gay talk of darling refectory tables and perfectly adorable scalloped oilcloth for kitchen-cabinet shelves.

He protested, however, against stopping at the model house in Paradise Heights.

"What for? Do you think I want to waste my time looking at a lot of rugs and stuff?"

"I think it's a pity to waste a perfectly good detective," said Lollie. "What's the good of being shadowed if we don't let him catch up with us and give him a chance to listen in?"

There was undeniably so much force in this that Gilbert did not attempt to dispute it. Glancing back, as he drove in between the welcoming signboards, he observed with gloomy satisfaction that the following car came to a halt at the side of the highway.

Lollie carried a key to the model house. She switched on the lights and opened one of the casement windows in the living room, where there was now enough furniture in place to create an effect of habitation and use. Gilbert looked about him uneasily. He brightened a little as a shadowy figure flitted past the open window to the cover of clumped evergreens.

"Sit in this chair, darling, and play your bassoon." Lollie faced the window and spoke in a clear, carrying tone of ardent affection. "I spent hours trying to find one that would be just absolutely comfortable for you when you're playing."

Gilbert lowered himself reluctantly to the softness of denim-covered cushions and persuaded the bassoon to speak.

"Is it all right, dearest?"

"I guess so." Gilbert produced another abysmal mutter.

"I'm so glad! Won't it be lovely, long winter evenings, sitting there and playing for me!" She danced toward him, laid her hand lightly against his cheek. "Oh, Gilbert, I'm so happy that you aren't

going on that old pilgrimage! You won't, will you? Promise me again!"

"Ooo-oof!" moaned the bassoon.

"Stop playing and promise me! Cross your heart and hope to die!"

"All right," said Gilbert. It was just play-acting, he knew, for the confusion of the spy, but it made him nervous, nevertheless, and he put an end to it, after a few moments, by announcing with firmness that he was going out to the piano works without more delay. Lollie yielded willingly enough. They shut the window and switched off the lights.

"He couldn't help hearing every word, that time!" said Lollie, as the old car resumed its melancholy grumble. "He must have seen me patting you on the cheek, too. He'll have something to report tomorrow, I guess!"

She spoke with a queer hint of fierceness, and Gilbert's uneasiness increased. At the piano factory, however, in the affable society of Mr. Fenstermacher, he felt a pleasant sense of safety, and was again altogether sorry that he was going on the pilgrimage. This was intensified by Mr. Fenstermacher's words, after the lesson.

"You're coming along fine. You've got the main thing a man needs if he expects to learn a tricky instrument like the bassoon. You've got perseverance. You take a violin, now, or any other easy instrument, and you can go at learning them off-and-on, but you've got to keep everlastingly at a bassoon. Why, if you quit for a week your lip's apt to soften up for you so you're right back where you started."

Gilbert coughed dismally.

"It would be a pity, then, if he had to stop playing for five or six months, wouldn't it?" said Lollie.

"A pity!" Mr. Fenstermacher wagged his head. "It'd be fatal, that's what it'd be! Yes, sir. Fatal."

He brightened.

"But he isn't going to stop," he said. "I can tell that by the way he goes at it." He clapped Gilbert's shoulder. "Same time tomorrow night, eh?"

He chose to interpret Gilbert's cough as affirmative.

"That's fine. I'd certainly miss you if you didn't come. When you're used to handling a crowd, the way you do in the funeraltor business, you certainly feel lonesome in a dreary job like night-watching. I'd be mighty blue if you didn't come out every night and bring your lady friend."

"Huh?" Gilbert was startled. Mr. Fenstermacher's eye, however, dwelt on Lollie with approving wistfulness, and the consternation of Gilbert's face escaped his notice.

"You've got the right idea about that, too. You picked out a girl that appreciates bassoon-playing. I guess *you* won't ever have to choose between giving up your art or having your home broken up for you."

He spoke with a faint bitterness and, waving farewell, closed the door.

"That's nice! Now you've given him the idea, too!"

Gilbert spoke with heat but Lollie seemed to take the matter lightly.

"What of it? Why should you care what he thinks?"

"I don't want anybody to think I'm crazy," said Gilbert. "Not *that* crazy. I'd rather go to India than have people going around saying I'm engaged to you!"

Emotion made him incautious.

"I've got a good mind to do it," he said. "I'd sooner do anything than——"

Lollie twisted in the seat so that she faced him.

"Gilbert Dolliver, if you did a contemptible, cowardly thing like that to me——"

"What would you do about it if I did?" He was defiant, truculent.

"I'd never speak to you again as long as I lived," said Lollie passionately. "Never!"

"You try it," said Gilbert. "Try it and see if I care!"

"I mean it!"

"Maybe you think I don't!"

She stared at him, wide-eyed. Then, abruptly, she flung herself into the corner of the seat, her hands hiding her face, a forlorn little huddle of grief. She sobbed. Gilbert was frightened. In precisely this way mama's heart attack had started. Lollie, to be sure, didn't look like a person who would have heart attacks, but neither did mama. He steered to the side of the road and stopped the car.

"Look, Lollie——"

Her shoulder angrily repulsed his hand.

"I didn't say I was going, did I?" He patted her arm. "Look, Lollie, don't!"

"Are you going or aren't you?"

Lollie's voice quivered miserably between her fingers. Gilbert disliked lying but his aversion, this evening, was still more intense as to heart attacks. Earnestly and convincingly he lied.

Lollie sat up, sniffing.

"Honestly?"

"Honestly."

She stopped sniffing.

"I thought you meant it. I thought you were really going to double-cross me."

"You know I wouldn't do a thing like that."

"If you did," said Lollie, solemnly, "I'd simply die! I mean I would, really."

Gilbert started the car. It would be a pity, of course, if Lollie died, but as between her life and mama's he had no right even to hesitate. A man certainly ought not to risk killing his mother just to save the life of a girl who had never done anything for him except to wad three of his curls together with peculiarly adhesive chewing gum.

He felt almost reconciled, at the moment, to the bleak prospect of tomorrow. The feeling endured until he left Lollie at her father's door, but as he drove away alone and realized that never again, in all human probability, would a flesh-and-blood detective dog his trail, he was saddened again. He would get away, by going, from the otherwise unescapable society of Lollie Plimsoll; he was bidding farewell, probably forever, to his detective and to his bassoon.

On the brink of slumber he remembered suddenly that he would also bid farewell, perhaps forever, to Mr. Arthur Timlow, and with this precious, comforting thought, he fell almost contentedly asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE telephone beside Belden Plimsoll's bed had no connection with the other instruments of his establishment. It was a private line, not listed in the directory, and only Gifford, a few department executives and Mr. Thomas Noonan knew its number.

It was Noonan whose voice came over this wire in the gray of early dawn.

"I hate to wake you, Mr. Plimsoll, but I doped it out I'd better. I figured you ought to know as quick as possible that Gilly Dolliver ain't going on that trip."

Plimsoll was instantly awake, in full possession of his normal clearness and speed of thought. He extracted Noonan's information with a few curt questions.

Experience had taught the president of the Intercontinental Adding Machine Corporation that bad news is nearly always exaggerated. He had also discovered, during the week, that Noonan, judging Lollie by his own limited intelligence, was easily misled by appearances. Plimsoll's first act, therefore, was to discount by a safe fifty per cent. the gravity of Noonan's report.

Gilbert had probably said he wasn't going. Almost any boy would say that, if a girl wanted him to. And it would be natural enough for Lollie to say something polite about being sorry he was going. That was very likely the truth as to what had passed be-

tween them, but in a matter like this it was wise to guard against every contingency, however remote.

"It's probably just talk," he said, "but there's no harm in playing safe. You get some sleep and be on hand to take the Limited at 10.17. I don't believe it's necessary, but you might as well keep an eye on him till he's safely on board the boat."

"What can I do if he doesn't get aboard?" said Noonan. "I can't very well shanghai him for you, if he——"

"You won't have to. He'll go, all right. I'm sending you along just so that I'll know it if anything slips. Keep me advised by wire. That's all."

He hung up the receiver. It was still too early for his ride, but he did not go back to bed; he wasn't deeply worried, to be sure, but he knew that he wouldn't be able to sleep.

Moving very quietly so as not to disturb Albertine, audibly asleep in the next room, he put on his riding clothes and went out into the tempered coolness of midsummer sunrise. He took a brisk walk about the grounds, thinking so intently that he hardly noticed how uncomfortable his boots were for pedestrian use.

Maybe, after all, there was something in that wild idea of Albertine's. Granting that Lollie was foolish enough to want to leave a home like this, a life like hers, she was smart enough to think out just such a scheme for getting her way. It was just the kind of a scheme that Plimsoll himself might have evolved. He found himself tempted to smile, now, at the idea, almost hoping, indeed, that it might prove to be correct.

He had some reason for allowing his desires to father his beliefs; his whole life stood as proof that he had the ability to translate wishes into facts, and

it was not illogical, therefore, that having opened his mind to the hope that Lollie was merely using Gilbert as a pawn on her chess-board, he should begin at once to believe exactly this.

Curiously, too, the idea no longer displeased him. The more he considered it the less he was inclined to resent it. He could even admire the cleverness of the scheme, take a father's pride in the shrewd little head that had conceived it.

He realized suddenly that he had been right about this thing all along. From the first mention of the fantastic desire to be a tap-dancer he had classified it where it belonged, among the funny notions that were always seizing upon childish fancy. Hadn't he told Albertine at once that this was just another dream, exactly like those which Lollie had outgrown? Hadn't he compared it to her earlier ambitions as to being a pirate, a circus rider, a trained nurse, a bird woman?

Of course he had! In this as in everything else, he had been absolutely right. The only difference between this latest fancy and those others was that Lollie was older, now, and smarter and more courageous—courageous enough to try matching her wits against her father's!

The droll effrontery of this delighted Plimsoll. It was exactly what his daughter would do, exactly what he had always done himself—ignoring little rivals and singling out the biggest enemy in sight.

He chuckled. So she thought she could outguess the old man, did she? Well, she'd find out that you had to get up pretty early in the morning to do anything like that? He glanced at his watch. It was only six—only five, by standard time, and Belden Plimsoll was already up and dressed and busy!

It had been his intention to send his car and chauf-

feur to drive Pansy and Gilbert to the station, but he amended this, at nine-thirty, and telephoned the man to call for him at the office. He was pretty sure that it wasn't necessary, but in a case like this it was perhaps a little safer to take charge, in person, of Pansy Dolliver's departure.

He had reason to congratulate himself upon the forethought. By the time Pansy herself, her twelve pieces of hand luggage, her son and his encased bassoon, were at last persuaded into the car, by the time Pansy had given her ultimate afterthought of instruction to Zenia and had caused the expedition to return for the passports and tickets she had left behind, it was necessary to extend the limousine to its best pace and if the Limited had been on time they might have missed it. As it was, they reached the platform soon enough, but not ten seconds too soon.

The train was on the very point of starting; all other passengers were on board, and while three porters dealt with her luggage a frowning trainman, watch in hand, robbed Pansy of her parting word with Plimsoll by assisting her, almost rudely, to the nearest step.

Gilbert delayed an instant. He looked capable, Plimsoll thought, of trying to back out. His glance shifted sidewise, up and down the platform and along the train, a furtive glance, like that of a cornered animal. Plimsoll was just about to interfere when Gilbert suddenly brightened, coughed and swung, as the wheels turned, to the car steps.

He had been looking so intently, at the moment when he seemed to reach his decision to depart, toward the rear platform of the car behind the one he boarded, that Plimsoll wondered whether something seen on that platform had reconciled him to the journey.

When, already moving swiftly, it drew abreast of where Plimsoll waited, he saw that he had been mistaken. On the top step, a hand raised in reassurance and farewell, stood Noonan, his dished countenance and bluish jaws resolute and competent. Plimsoll waved to him. Pleasing as it was to him, the sight of Noonan couldn't possibly have meant anything to Gilbert Dolliver or had anything to do with his sudden willingness to go.

It was, Plimsoll decided as he turned away, just one of those coincidences. The word reminded him of Greminger and he was grinning, when he reached his waiting car, at the pathetic artlessness of those to whom perfectly fortuitous happenings wear the look of carefully premeditated designs of Destiny.

He was in high good humor with himself when he came home that evening.

He was pleased with himself and singularly pleased with his daughter, and he came in smiling, prepared to behave as the most magnanimous of winners. Albertine's face, concerned and puzzled, merely gave him an agreeable awareness of intellectual superiority. He chuckled cheerfully.

"Now what's on your poor tired mind, Teenie?"

Albertine's look rebuked this levity.

"I'm frightened, Belden. I really am, this time."

"What about?" He continued to grin indulgently.

"About Lollie, of course. I can hardly bear to think it, but I'm afraid she really does like that awful boy."

"Gilbert?" He laughed. "That's absurd, Teenie. And even if it weren't, there'd be nothing to worry about. He's on his way to India."

"And Lollie's been locked in her room all afternoon," Albertine broke in solemnly. "She wouldn't

let me in but I heard her crying. And you know she doesn't cry easily. She's like me—she never cries unless she's terribly cut up about something. And you know how interested she's been in decorating and furnishing that house—she's talked of nothing else, almost, for a week, and today, when she came in and I said something pleasant about it, she said she hated it and never wanted to hear another word about it as long as she lived, and then she ran upstairs and locked her door."

"She hates to be licked, that's all. I don't wonder. She comes by that naturally." Plimsoll chuckled. "There's nothing the matter with her except that she tried to out-smart her old man and got the worst of it."

"I don't know what you mean." Albertine's eyes widened. "Have you——"

"She's been bluffing and I've called her bluff, that's all. I've told you right along that there was nothing in this Gilbert business except a pretty smart attempt to stampede us into letting her go to New York."

"What?" Albertine's mouth stayed blankly open.

"She's been pretending to be interested in the boy, that's all. She began by just going out with him and when that didn't work she tried to make us believe she might be insane enough to elope with him. And when that was no use, she thought up this house racket. She's as smart as they make 'em, but——" he grinned—"she's not quite smart enough to stack up against her old father! I'm a bad man to bluff, Teenie."

"But you said——"

"Wait. I want you to get all of this. It's good. You see, when she first got the notion of using Gilbert to scare us, it didn't occur to her that I might put him

where he couldn't possibly be dangerous. When I did just that, though, and the whole bottom dropped out of her scheme, she didn't quit. Not a bit of it. There's no quitter blood in Lollie! What does she do? She tries her level best to persuade that spineless, lazy pup to stand up and refuse to go on this trip I framed up for him. And she got him to promise her, only last night, that he'd stick."

"But he went, didn't he?"

"You bet he went, and I'll tell you why. I heard about that promise pretty nearly as soon as it was made. Never mind how. But I make a point of knowing about pretty nearly everything that affects my daughter and I knew about this in plenty of time to go and drive Pansy and the boy down to the train myself."

Albertine's mouth tightened.

"I don't see why you felt you had to do that," she said sharply. "After the way that woman's been——"

"Well, I did and it's a good thing, too, because if I hadn't they'd have missed the train and the boat and been around here for another week or two, and maybe not gone at all."

"Ernest is perfectly capable of driving people to the train," said Albertine. "I don't see any reason why you had to do it yourself and give people another chance to think you're still——"

"Let me finish. If I'd let Ernest go after them he might have got them to the train in time, though I doubt it, but he wouldn't have got Gilbert on it."

Albertine stared.

"Pansy and about a million bags were on it, and it was just starting," said Plimsoll. "Gilbert didn't get on. He stayed on the platform and I'm pretty sure he'd have kept on standing there if he hadn't looked

behind and seen me. That was what decided it. If I hadn't been there he wouldn't have gone."

Albertine sniffed.

"I almost wish he hadn't," she said. "I'd feel safer about Lollie if he'd stayed here where she can't help seeing how awful he is."

"Don't worry about that part of it," laughed Plimsoll. "She knows how awful he is, all right. And it suits me a great deal better to have him so far away that I don't even have to think about him. By this time tomorrow he'll be at sea and I only hope he'll be as sick as I was the last time I crossed."

"I wouldn't be too sure," said Albertine. "He won't go unless Pansy makes him and you ought to know Pansy too well to be sure of her doing anything. She's surprised me by even starting. I never thought she'd actually go."

"I told you she was going, didn't I? Haven't you found out yet that when I say a thing's going to happen it does happen?"

"I was thinking about Cousin Arthur," said Albertine, with her irritating trick of ignoring a cornering question.

"So was I." Plimsoll laughed. "Arthur's on that train with her. He's going all the way to India."

Albertine stared. "Where on earth could Arthur Timlow get money enough to go on a trip like that?"

"Where does he ever get money?"

"Do you mean to say that you gave it to him?"

"Well, it comes down to that, I suppose, but your Cousin Arthur's delicate feelings wouldn't allow him to accept a gift unless there was another label on it. He's my confidential agent, going out to inspect the branch offices in India." Plimsoll winked cheerfully.

"But that's a secret. They don't even know about it at the office."

Albertine eyed him steadily. He was familiar with the expression. It informed him not merely that his wife had failed to see the shrewdness of his manœuvre but also that she felt for him the patient, weary pity of superior intelligence.

"What's the matter now?" he demanded. Albertine shook her head slowly. She sighed.

"You put Arthur Timlow on the payroll," she said, "and as if that wasn't enough, you send him off on a long sea voyage with Pansy Mole!"

Plimsoll, justly wounded by the look and tone and seeing no reason whatever in the words, was nevertheless aware of a dim uneasiness. Every now and then when Albertine spoke to him in this exasperatingly superior manner, she proved to be right. As a reasoning animal he could find nothing whatever wrong with his strategy; Albertine, who never reasoned, evidently found everything wrong with it. He was on the point of challenging her for explanation when Lollie came in.

He forgot about Albertine in the sudden pride that his daughter inspired in him. Lollie was a good loser; Albertine must have been wrong in thinking that she had cried, for there were no signs whatever of tears in the countenance that smiled briefly at Lollie's father. She was cooler, more nonchalant than usual, helping herself to a cigarette and lighting it with the air of one slightly bored with the world but otherwise negligently at peace with it.

This attitude she preserved through dinner. Plimsoll, his pleased pride in his daughter steadily increasing, was careful to avoid any reference to his triumph and her defeat, but as they were leaving the table

Albertine tactlessly asked Lollie what she was going to do with her evenings now that Gilbert had gone.

Lollie turned slowly to regard her mother. Her face was disdainful.

"Please don't insult me," she said icily, "by implying that it matters to me where that perfectly repellent boy goes."

Calmly she turned and walked away. Her steps sounded deliberately on the stairs and in the distance there was the soft jar of a gently closing door.

Plimsoll beamed triumphantly upon his wife.

"I told you s——"

He paused. Albertine was not beaming, but in her darkened look there was, unmistakably, the gloomy triumph of vindicated foreboding.

"No," said Albertine, incredibly, "*I* told *you* so!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

AS HE made his way, carrying his cased bassoon, along the narrow corridor that passed the open doors of pigeon-hole compartments containing his fellow travellers, Gilbert Dolliver was almost reconciled to the journey that lay before him.

Travel, after all, might not turn out to be as dull as he had feared. He would, at least, continue to enjoy the privilege of being shadowed, and this, he perceived, would probably be even more agreeable, on trains and steamers and in far, strange lands, than it had been at home.

The reflection cheered him. He was able to nod politely to Mrs. Dilbey, as he passed her compartment, and he discovered, meeting the eye of the neat, stoop-shouldered little man who sat beside her, that he had always rather liked Mrs. Dilbey's husband.

At the next doorway, however, his contentment vanished. Mama stood surrounded by a heap of assorted luggage, and bending over mama's hand was Mr. Timlow. Gilbert coughed.

The sound evidently startled mama. With some haste she withdrew her hand from Mr. Timlow's gallant clasp and pressed it against her heart. Her face became apprehensive and supplicating.

"Isn't this a pleasant surprise, Baby? Mr. Timlow's going to New York too."

"The surprise for you, dear lady," said Mr. Timlow, "the pleasure for me."

Gilbert's cough gagged a little. His mother spoke hurriedly.

"You'd better find your own compartment, Baby. You haven't had your meditation this morning, you know, and I'm sure Mr. Timlow will help me settle my baggage."

It was evident that Mr. Timlow yearned vehemently for this privilege. Gilbert withdrew swiftly. In his own compartment he glowered out upon verdant, smiling farm-lands. As compensation for Mr. Timlow even the unexpected presence of the detective seemed less than adequate. But it occurred to him, after a little, that the detective would trail him all the way to India, whereas Mr. Timlow was only going to New York. Greatly cheered he fumbled in his pocket for the implements of meditation. Stooping, he gave himself over to close study of the behavior, on the unsteady carpet, of the large, green, rhinestone-studded dice.

He was so intent upon his experiments that he did not hear his door open. He looked up to meet the mild, apologetic, faintly wistful gaze of Mrs. Dilbey's husband.

"Pachisi," said Gilbert. "Practicing."

"H'm. Pachisi. Yes." Mrs. Dilbey's husband appeared to meditate. "But we should want a board."

He looked so definitely wistful, now, that Gilbert's profound disesteem for the game itself gave way to a generous pity for anybody who could look like this at the prospect of playing it.

"I guess my mother brought our board along," he said. "If you want to play I'll go and get it."

"Fine!" Mr. Dilbey rubbed his hands. Gilbert, his vague sense of fellowship abating a little, went to the next compartment. He endeavored, as he made

known his errand, to keep his eye away from Mr. Timlow, who sank nearer to the nethermost level of Gilbert's regard by warmly applauding the proposal.

"A splendid game," he declared. "Excellent. But you will find a compartment rather too small to play in, I'm afraid. Why not have the porter put up a table for you in my drawing room?"

"How kind!" Mrs. Dolliver looked up quickly from the suitcase in which she had just discovered the pachisi board.

"Not at all," said Mr. Timlow. "Anything, dear lady, that I can do for you, or for this dear lad of yours——"

Gilbert seized the board and withdrew, strangling slightly. He had no intention of accepting any favors at Mr. Timlow's hand, but Mr. Dilbey, made acquainted with the offer, warmly urged its advantages.

"She won't——" he paused. "We shan't be disturbed if we use Timlow's room. It would be much better. Much better."

Gilbert yielded. The porter set up a table and Mr. Dilbey, closing the door, unfolded the board with so much eagerness that Gilbert was moved to comment.

"I didn't know you liked the game so much."

Mr. Dilbey regarded him steadily. Amazingly, incredibly, over one of the pale, timid eyes, an eloquent lid descended.

"I used to be very fond of the game you were playing," said Mr. Dilbey's mild voice. "It will be best, however, to play it on the table, so that if she—if anybody should come in, we shall appear to be playing pachisi. And it would be unwise, I think, to show any money, but these colored discs will serve as counters."

He unbuttoned his vest, unclasped two safety pins

from its lining and withdrew from an inner pocket a creased fold of worn bills, showing the marks of protective perforation.

"I have sixty dollars here," he said.

Gilbert emerged from stunned daze to rapt delight.

"I've only got twenty," he announced.

"Pinks," said Mr. Dilbey, "are tens, blues are fives, greens and yellows ones."

His fingers trembled slightly as he distributed the profaned pachisi men.

"Pewee," he whispered huskily. "Pewee, boy!"

Gilbert rolled one of the dice. It seemed a careless movement, and yet, turning lazily, the green cube came to rest with six rhinestones gleaming from its uppermost facet. Mr. Dilbey rolled a deuce and Gilbert, gathering the dice, breathed earnestly upon them. He pushed a yellow chip forward.

"Shoots a dollar," he announced.

"Faded!" Mr. Dilbey whispered.

"Sevum day saints, rally round!" Gilbert's right hand moved, again with seeming nonchalance. "And I reads four-trey! Shoots the two."

"Faded!" said Mr. Dilbey.

Presently, having watched his final pink disc dissolve into greens and yellows and these parade across the board to join their fellows at Gilbert's elbow, he inhaled profoundly and leaned back.

"You're too hot for me," he said. He glanced behind him toward the door and with a swift, furtive movement, passed the folded bills across the board. "That cleans me."

"I hate to take your last cent," said Gilbert.

"Oh, I can get more." His timid eye moved slowly about the room. "Timlow must be in funds or he wouldn't be traveling in a drawing room. You have

to buy two railroad tickets for that. He's owed me a hundred dollars since a year ago last March. I'll get that from him."

Gilbert shook his head. "He probably spent his last cent on this room. That's the way he is. A four-flusher."

"I think he has plenty, this time. He told me, in confidence, that he had a fine position with B. V. Plimsoll."

Gilbert scowled. Another black mark went down against Lakeport's first citizen. It was B. V. Plimsoll's fault that mama had been able to raise the money for this pilgrimage; if it had not been for B. V. Plimsoll's interference, this morning, Gilbert would almost certainly have missed the train. Also, although perhaps a man's daughter ought to be considered his misfortune rather than his fault, B. V. Plimsoll was indirectly to blame for the indignity and anguish of the chewing-gum affair at dancing school.

Now, according to Mrs. Dilbey's husband, it appeared that B. V. Plimsoll was responsible for Mr. Arthur Timlow's presence on the train.

It was a climactic moment, although Gilbert did not suspect it. Heretofore his antipathy toward Belden Plimsoll had been indolently passive. At this point it became conscious, active and—for Gilbert—intense.

For the first time he harbored the thought, hopeless as yet, but enticing, of getting even, somehow, some day, with Lollie Plimsoll's father.

His spirits rose a little, in the dining car at luncheon time, when he caught sight of the blue-chinned detective at a nearby table; they rose still farther, later in the afternoon, when he acquired the hundred dollars which Mr. Dilbey astonishingly had collected from

Mr. Timlow. This latter pleasure, however, was dulled by Mr. Dilbey's account of that transaction.

"He gave me the money without the slightest hesitancy. He has plenty left, too. I couldn't help seeing into his wallet when he paid me and it was full of large bills." He sighed. "It would be nice if we could get him into this game, wouldn't it?"

Gilbert brightened but only for a moment.

"He wouldn't play, and if he lost he'd run and squawk."

Mr. Dilbey seemed disturbed by the suggestion. He glanced behind him and half rose from his seat as the doorknob was slowly turned. He sank down again, with visible relief, when the narrow opening disclosed the intellectual face of Arthur Timlow.

"Your dear mother is about to take a nap, Gilbert, and I thought I might join your game for a time."

Mr. Timlow spoke in the voice of one bearing glad tidings. He slid into the seat beside Mr. Dilbey and reached for the dice-cup.

"I used to be very good at pachisi," he said. "I'll bet I can whip you both at it."

Gilbert sat up suddenly.

"How much do you want to bet?"

Mr. Timlow looked shocked. "Tsk-tsk! I was speaking figuratively, of course. I never gamble."

"It wouldn't be gambling," said Gilbert.

"Betting is always gambling, my dear lad, and gambling in any form is both wrong and stupid. It detracts from the pleasure of the sport. Even if there were no moral issue involved, it would be a sad pity to spoil a fine game like pachisi by wagering money on the result."

"I don't see how anything could spoil pachisi," said Gilbert gloomily. Mr. Timlow beamed.

"It is, as you say, a splendid pastime, Gilbert—the king, if I may use the word, of indoor sports, but gambling would spoil it. Yes, even pachisi. Shall I throw first?"

They played till dinner time. The dice cup, which Mr. Timlow insisted upon employing, was a considerable handicap for Gilbert, but he was generously complimented, nevertheless, as they quitted the board.

"You play a sound game, Gilbert. Yes, very sound. We must play often."

"There won't be any chance to play after today," Gilbert pointed out. "Our boat goes tomorrow morning."

"Of course! I was forgetting." He stepped into the corridor and bowed deeply as Mrs. Dolliver appeared in the doorway of her compartment.

"Ah, dear lady! May I have the pleasure and honor of your company at dinner—yours, that is, and this dear lad's?"

Gilbert spoke quickly.

"We can't," he said. "We're vegetarians and——"

Mr. Timlow smiled. "It shall be a dinner of herbs, then. Yes. A dinner of herbs, where lo——"

"I guess I better do some fasting, tonight," Gilbert cut in. He knew the quotation, which had been prominently featured in his last religion but three. "I had a good lunch and I guess I better stay right here and——"

"An excellent idea," said Mr. Timlow heartily. "The very best thing you could do!"

"Yes." Mrs. Dolliver agreed. "You might meditate a little, too."

"Yes'm. I might," said Gilbert. He retreated into his own compartment to let them pass. His dark humor deepened slowly as the pangs of wholesome

hunger added bodily discomfort to mental gloom. Later, when mama and Mr. Timlow had come back, he was able to slip away unnoticed to the diner, where a thick beefsteak, garnished with golden onions, a wedge of pie and three cups of coffee assuaged the pains of thwarted appetite but in no wise mitigated his spiritual discontent.

This grew upon him as the evening dragged. Mrs. Dilbey monopolized her husband's society and there was no sign of the blue-chinned detective. Being shadowed while on a train, Gilbert decided, was pretty tame when you compared it to being shadowed as you drove your car out over the Egandale Road to the old piano factory.

He fingered the keys of his bassoon and thought sorrowfully of Mr. Fenstermacher. Indeed, as he fell asleep, ingloriously, at ten o'clock, he had even begun to regret Lollie a little. When you considered her in comparison to Arthur Timlow, Lollie wasn't so bad. Yes, he decided, if he could just get off the train and start the old car out toward Egandale, he wouldn't mind taking Lollie Plimsoll along. Not very much, anyway.

In the morning, however, there was a comforting excitement in leaving the train, in driving dangerously through New York streets to the pier, in boarding a steamer, in taking possession of a cabin pleasantly nautical, in exploring, after mama had been settled at last in her brass-bedded stateroom, the rest of the ship. Gilbert was feeling very much better when he encountered Mr. Timlow in the companionway just as he was emerging to the promenade deck.

Even this meeting did not greatly disturb him. He had been prepared for it. A man so addicted to public hand-kissings wouldn't be apt to overlook such a

chance as this. With only a slight frown and a short cough, therefore, by way of acknowledging Mr. Timlow's gracious greeting, Gilbert passed him by.

Leaning against the rail and looking down at the pier, he made a reassuring discovery. The blue-chinned detective stood at the pier end of the gang-plank, his hands deeply in the pockets of his blue serge coat, a bitten cigar grimly wedged at the extreme corner of his mouth, the brim of his felt hat tilted low above his eyes.

Gilbert was delighted. It was clear that the mysterious enemy who was watching him had seen fit to put a good man on the job. This fellow knew his business. He was waiting down there till there was no chance for his quarry to escape him by slipping ashore.

He made Gilbert feel pleasantly dangerous. Maybe, after all, it wouldn't be so bad. There was a notice in the smoking room about professional gamblers that held forth bright hopes; there was the newly revealed community of interest with Mrs. Dilbey's husband; there was the grim, ominous detective waiting at the gang-plank, and maybe it would be fun to be shadowed on board a big ship. Also, and best, Mr. Timlow would presently make his last low bow and descend the gang-plank. Yes. It might turn out a whole lot better than he had expected.

The whistle sent through him the agreeable shivering thutter of a Brobdignagian bassoon; a voice shouted something about visitors going ashore. Gilbert kept his eyes fixed on the detective. It was about time, now, for him to be coming aboard. Instead, however, he removed his hands from his pockets, pulled down his coat, rolled the stub of his cigar swiftly to the opposite corner of his mouth and, lifting a cold

hard gaze briefly to where Gilbert stood, he wheeled and walked briskly away.

The pleasant feeling of importance and dangerousness fell away from Gilbert. He wasn't going to be shadowed, after all. Evidently he ceased to be of interest once he was safely on board a ship. Somebody was afraid of him as long as he stayed ashore, though. Somebody must be pretty anxious to get him out of the country.

He felt at once and naturally a strong reason for not going, a double reason. He wasn't wanted here, and this was of course the best possible argument in favor of staying. Also, if he stayed, he would almost certainly keep on being shadowed.

Mama's voice intruded upon these meditations. It came from behind him and its quality and tone apprised him, before he turned, that Mr. Timlow was within earshot. He was, in fact, standing beside mama at the end of the companionway.

"Oh, there you are, Baby!" cooed mama. "Will you run down and make sure that I locked my stateroom door? I'm afraid I left it open."

"Pray let me have that pleasure, dear lady," begged Mr. Timlow.

Gilbert swallowed a short, sharp gagging cough.

"No," he said firmly. "You won't have time. The last bell's rung and you ought to be getting ashore or——"

Mr. Timlow bent upon him a gaze of surpassing benevolence. Mama, for some reason, looked slightly worried and her hand rose warningly to press her heart.

"I'm not going ashore, my dear lad," said Mr. Timlow. "I'm going with you. All the way."

Gilbert coughed.

"Isn't that a lovely surprise, Baby?" said mama.

"I nearly spoiled it yesterday, when we were playing pachisi." Mr. Timlow's head wagged. "Your dear mother wanted to wait till we were on board before telling you, but I almost let it slip."

He clapped Gilbert's shoulder affectionately.

"So you see we'll have plenty of chances to play pachisi, after all. All the way to India!"

Gilbert's glance shifted to mama's face. She was still faintly apprehensive, still softly suppliant, but her smile held, too, a dim suggestion of triumph. Her son coughed.

"I better go and see about that door," he said.

Mr. Timlow's gaze followed him with approval.

"Not many lads, I fear, would run so fast to do an errand for a mother." He paused, bowed. "But then, what other lad has such a mother?"

Mrs. Dolliver laughed softly. She accepted Mr. Timlow's gallant arm and suffered him to guide her upon an unhurried circuit of the deck. They were not within view of the gang-plank at the moment of its withdrawal, but they stood together at the rail as the *Campestre* slowly backed out into the river, and both waved in answer to the flutter of farewell handkerchiefs on the pier.

"It seems silly to be doing this," said Mrs. Dolliver. "When there's nobody down there we know."

Mr. Timlow loved accuracy for its own sake.

"We can't be sure of that," he pointed out. "Unknown to either of us, there may be some one there to whom, if we knew of his presence, we should both wave with all our hearts."

"What a wonderful thought!" said Mrs. Dolliver.

And, holding it solemnly between them, they renewed their wavings toward the receding pier.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE art of hating, Lollie Plimsoll had discovered, is like other arts in that practice makes for perfection and for ease. At first, just after discovering Gilbert's perfidy, it had been impossible to hate him properly, even by giving to the task all her time and all her mental powers. Now, after forty-eight hours, she was able to do a very satisfactory job of hating and still have time and strength for other things.

Almost too much time, she had begun to realize. Having gone early to bed and to sleep for two successive nights, she had wakened, on Friday morning, some hours too soon, and before luncheon time had done enough hating for the day, had done it thoroughly and without great mental or bodily fatigue, and now faced an afternoon barren of congenial occupation.

It was therefore natural and just that she should regard herself as the innocent victim of unfriendly circumstance and should approach the table in no humor for the bungling intrusions of maternal solicitude, that she should rebuke, at first by silence and at last by word, her mother's slightly apprehensive attempts to manufacture conversation.

"I haven't heard you practicing your clog—your tap-dancing lately. I hope you haven't given it up."

Lollie arched her eyebrows, achieving the look of one valiantly patient under wanton injury.

"Really, mother! Have I ever given you any

reason for thinking I haven't any perseverance at all? Just because I don't practice every minute——"

"Oh, I didn't mean that, dear." Mrs. Plimsoll was eagerly pacific. "I was just going to say that I hoped you'd have more time, now, for your cl—for your dancing, because I think it's so splendid for a girl to have an interest like that."

"Now?" echoed Lollie dangerously. "Why should I have any more time now than I've always had?"

"Why"—Mrs. Plimsoll's hands made a fluttering gesture of appeasement—"I only meant that you've seemed so busy, lately, going out every night the way you——"

"And what makes you think I shan't be going out any more?" This was in Lollie's ice-creamiest voice. Again her mother's hands fluttered.

"I didn't mean that. What I meant to say was"—Mrs. Plimsoll brightened a little—"was that you won't be so busy, any more, with that house you've been decorating."

"Why won't I?" Lollie's eyebrows arched. "Really, mother!"

Mrs. Plimsoll found a forlorn flash of spirit.

"Please don't speak to me like that, Lollie. You told me yourself that you never wanted to hear another word about that house!"

"And so, of course, it's the one thing you insist on talking about!"

"I don't! I won't be badgered this way, Lollie! Just because I said that as long as you'd stopped decorating that house you'd have more time for your dancing——"

"I didn't know I'd been—badgering you, mother." Lollie gave the word the vocal effect of quotation

marks. "I'm sorry that you've lost your temper, but——"

"You aren't sorry! You've been trying your very best to make me lose it ever since you sat down at this table! You've been just as hateful to me as you could!"

Frankly Mrs. Plimsoll wept. Her daughter, rising, wore the mien of one who, sorely misjudged and wronged, endures nobly and forgives.

"Of course, mother, if you're determined to think I'm so perfectly loathsome, I can't prevent it, but at least I can refuse to let you draw me into a disgraceful squabble."

She withdrew deftly before Mrs. Plimsoll found a retort. On the way out to the garage, in slightly better humor with herself, she paused to watch the fledgling robins. At the sound of her approach they lifted loud, peevish voices and, with rude elbowings of wing, endeavored to crowd each other out of the nest.

Lollie scowled at them. Young birds were horrible little creatures, she thought. It was a wonder that the old robins should go to all the trouble of building a nest just to crowd it with these perfectly repulsive offspring—greedy and ugly and so stupid that they seemed actually trying to make their home as unhappy and uncomfortable as they could!

She wondered why the old birds bothered to bring them up.

There were quite a lot of small green apples on the dwarf trees, this year—so many that even this early in the season the branches that bore them had begun to bend down wearily under their weight. To Lollie's eye, however, the trees and their young fruit only served as a reminder of her father, and of the

wilful misunderstanding, the injustice and oppression of which he was guilty.

Her frown darkened. It became suddenly clear to her that to all his other offenses her father had added an insult utterly unforgivable.

He actually believed that she liked Gilbert Dolliver!

He believed this of his own daughter! He believed it so completely that he had gone to a lot of trouble and expense to get rid of Gilbert. And why? Just because she'd gone out, a few times, in Gilbert's crazy old car—just because she'd jokingly spoken kindly of that horrible boy! He thought—he actually thought —she had been furnishing that house out in Paradise Heights because—*ugh!*—she hoped to live in it some day with—Gilbert!

He still thought this. Even her mother thought it. Yes. Even her own mother, another woman, who ought to know better, no matter if she was over forty!

That was what her mother had practically said at luncheon—practically accused her own daughter of fixing up that house on account of Gilbert Dolliver! Her mother had shown that she expected Lollie to lose interest in the house now that Gilbert—and serve him right!—was on his way to India to be a Buddhist priest!

A nice thing to believe about your own child! Practically accusing her of being crazy about a perfectly repellent boy, a boy who'd turned her down and gone to India, the coward, to stick knives through his arms and sit on red-hot coals, the way Buddhist priests had to.

Lollie spared a side-thought for the fervent hope that Gilbert's coals would be especially hot, but her mind came back at once to the matter of the house.

She owed it to herself to show the parents who

were so willing to think evil of their only child that there was no relation whatever between her slight acquaintance with Gilbert Dolliver and her perfectly natural interest in interior decoration. And the best way, obviously, of proving this, was to go on with that house-furnishing exactly as if nothing had happened.

Lollie's spirits rose. The afternoon ceased to loom emptily before her. She drove out along the Egandale Road in a frame of mind that was cheered by some overtime hating, by further reflections upon the unpleasantnesses attending the lot of a Buddhist priest. Didn't they have to sit cross-legged in the sun and shave their heads and be kind to flies and mosquitoes and snakes?

Lollie brightened suddenly as she remembered the rice-pudding sorrows of her own childhood. Buddhist priests had to live on rice!

She came into the office of Paradise Heights Manor wearing the expression engendered by this pleasing thought, and greeted Mr. Greminger, rising ponderously from his desk, with gay cordiality.

Mr. Greminger's abiding faith in the friendliness of destiny, severely shaken by the item in this morning's Lakeport *Courier* and by the little lady's ominous failure, yesterday, to make her usual visit to the model home, was now confirmed and vindicated. His nineteen years of signal success in the exacting game of selling high-class subdivision homesites had demanded and developed, as he frequently explained, a subconscious pers'nality that was kind of teluhpathic, and it was this which now enlightened and governed him.

The little lady's boy-friend had left her waiting at the church but she wasn't going to advertise the fact by laying down on the job of furnishing the love-nest.

No, sir. She was a good sport and a game loser, and it was no part of the high-class homesite subdivision game to bring up unhappy topics of conversation.

Mr. Greminger, therefore, conspicuously forebore to mention that item in the *Courier*.

"I was juss going up to take a look at the overcurtains in the lib'ary," he said, "but somepin told me you'd be showing up and so I waited. Less go see how that lib'ary looks."

It looked very well indeed. So well that, as she seated herself in the deep, soft denim-covered chair to survey the effect of the newly hung overcurtains, Lollie's lower lip quivered a little.

"It's perfectly darling," she said. "I'm just going to hate letting somebody else buy it and live in it when it's finished."

Mr. Greminger wagged his head solemnly.

"Don't you believe for a minute that anybody else is gonna take title to this prop'ty, little lady. I wouldn't of been such a success in the high-class end of this game if my subconscious pers'nality wasn't teluhpathic enough to know the difference between juss a quincidence and a thing thass *meant!*"

He clicked his cheek so impressively against the golden molars that Lollie felt a curiously heartening sense of reassurance.

For some reason it became necessary and possible to hate Gilbert Dolliver a little more earnestly than ever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE task of disabusing her parents' minds of the intolerable suspicion that she regretted, for sentimental reasons, Gilbert Dolliver's departure, was greatly simplified for Lollie by Mr. Cadwallader Jarrett's presence at the dinner-table.

He provided her with the means of demonstrating not merely her freedom from any lingering fondness for Gilbert but her active pleasure in the society of some one else. Moreover he justified her in a display of ardent daughterliness which, with increasing frequency as the meal progressed, constrained her father to glance triumphantly across the table at his wife.

"There! Didn't I tell you so?"

The words were not uttered, to be sure, but Plimsoll could see that they carried, nevertheless, to Albertine, and that although she did not visibly admit their justice, she was quite able to decode their meaning.

Albertine's face, obstinately uncheerful, was the only flaw in an occasion otherwise perfect. Plimsoll resented it, not only because wrong-headedness always exasperated him, but mainly because of the implied reflection on his vindicated judgment and diplomacy.

It was therefore with relief as well as pleasure that he heard his daughter, after coffee in the living room, invite young Mr. Jarrett to the library—pleasure because Lollie, for the first time, addressed Mr. Jarrett as Cadwallader, relief because it was now feasible to speak frankly to Albertine.

He waited until the radio provided a protective

screen of clamor. Then, leaning forward, elbows on knees, he spoke.

"For heaven's sake, Teenie, snap out of it! Didn't you hear her call him Cadwallader?"

Teenie's mouth tightened to the provocative obstinacy of the meek.

"Yes, I heard her."

"Well, then, stop looking as if you'd lost your last friend! For weeks you've been making yourself and everybody else miserable about nothing."

"Nothing!" Bitterness was in Albertine's echo.

"Yes. Nothing and nothing net! You couldn't help seeing, all through dinner, that Lollie's all right. Nobody could have been any nicer to you and me."

"That boy was there." Albertine sniffed. "Of course she had to be sweet to us."

Plimsoll was astounded. His own uncanny knowledge of the human mind had observed, of course, that the nearness of a personable young man could intensify, subconsciously, an adoring daughter's outward show of affection for a worthy sire, but he had never suspected that Teenie could be capable of making this discovery for herself.

"Well, even allowing for that she was perfectly lovely to us, all through dinner."

Albertine sniffed again. "You ought to have heard her at lunch!"

"Well, if you insisted on insulting her with this wild idea of yours that she actually liked that Dolliver boy, I don't blame her for resenting it!"

"Oh, I knew you'd find some way of saying it was all my fault! You always blame me for everything!"

Barely in time Plimsoll controlled an impulse to deal sternly with this irrelevant and groundless charge. Nothing would be gained by giving Albertine a chance

to cry. He forced himself to speak with gentleness and affection.

"There, there, Teenie. I'm just trying to make you realize how silly it is to insist on worrying about nothing."

"Nothing!" Again Albertine's echo vibrated with reproach. "Do you think it's nothing when your own daughter falls in love with——"

"Of course not! If I thought my daughter was capable of doing such a thing I'd—well, I'd find some way of handling that, too. That's just what I'm trying to make you understand. I think you ought to admit, in ordinary fairness, that I generally manage anything I have to. It isn't as if you had to take my word for it. You know what happened to Daniel H. Masterson when he thought he was big enough to jam into the adding-machine game."

"Oh, that!" Albertine shrugged her shoulders. "That was just business."

Plimsoll overlooked the almost blasphemous innuendo of the tone. He inhaled deeply.

"Exactly," he said. "And so is this. Everything's a business. Life's a business. Being a father's a business. And I'm just as competent to manage this father business as I am when I'm selling adding machines. I've proved it. Look the facts in the face, Teenie. Just suppose, for a minute, that you were right and that Lollie was really in lo—really fond of that young pup? What difference would it make? I knew all along that she wasn't, of course, but you were worried about it and so I took hold. You've seen what's happened. Inside of ten days Gilbert's on his way to India, to spend the rest of his life sitting in front of a big bronze idol spinning a prayer wheel. What's the sense of worrying about him?"

"I'm not worrying about him," said Albertine. "I'm worrying about Lollie."

Plimsoll sighed patiently.

"Why? She hasn't even mentioned him since he left except to say he was loathsome."

"That's just why I'm worried. If she'd only talk about him I'd know she wasn't thinking about him."

Plimsoll spread his hands.

"There's no arguing against such absolutely cock-eyed logic as that. If you're bound to be miserable, I can't stop you. You can't help seeing, though, that Lollie isn't miserable."

He wagged his head in the direction of the library.

"Even if you were right you wouldn't need to worry, as long as I'm on my job of being a father. I know enough not to take a child's toys away from her without giving her something else to play with. Even if Lollie liked Gilbert it wouldn't matter, as long as I can ship him halfway round the world and bring home a boy like that fine youngster in there now. I don't say that he's good enough for Lollie, but I do know that he's good enough to make her forget Gilbert Dolliver in five minutes by the clock!"

"How?" demanded Albertine. "Do you really think that the way to make Lollie forget about Gilbert, who at least doesn't talk about adding machines, is to bring home somebody who can't talk about anything else?"

Plimsoll was dumbfounded. Albertine, speaking of adding machines in the voice of anger and contempt! He realized, however, that in her present mental state it would be injudicious to deal justly with this blasphemy. And, as if to refute the slander upon Mr. Jarrett's conversational gifts, at just this instant,

creamily clear above the muted groans and snortings of the radio, came Lollie's laughter.

Even Albertine seemed impressed. Her face, incredulous and startled, turned blankly toward the library door. Plimsoll, rising to obtain a cigarette, swerved in his returning course so that, as if by accident, he came within earshot of the voices in the other room.

"No, seriously——" and Mr. Jarrett's voice was very serious—"I think your father is the greatest man in the United States. Just the few contacts I've had with him so far—why, you can't imagine what they've meant to me. I can hardly believe it's true that I'm associated in business with B. V. Plimsoll, that I'm invited to his house this way——"

Appalled by the recollection that there had been a moment when he had doubted, almost disliked this admirable young fellow, Belden Plimsoll tiptoed back to his chair. He found his wife's eye fixed upon him with its supremely irritating look of seeing through him.

"Well? What was he telling her about adding machines to make her laugh like that?"

Plimsoll hesitated. As the question was phrased, a truthful answer would make it appear that his daughter had been moved to mirth by a conservative estimate of her father's worth.

"He was telling her a funny story," he said.

"I didn't think he knew one," said Albertine. She continued to gaze skeptically at the doorway. "And I didn't like the way she laughed, either." Her look clouded. "It sounded—well, there was something bitter about it."

Plimsoll's patience vanished.

"I've had enough of this nonsense, Teenie! Every-

thing's all right and you know it, but you're bound and determined to be miserable and to make me miserable too. If you're going to keep this up till you go to bed, for heaven's sake go now and let me get a little peace! I've earned it and I need it and I'm going to have it!"

Albertine, without answering, rose and withdrew. The sound of her feet on the stairs, of her closing door overhead, came to her husband with a quality of weary repetition. All this had been happening, lately, every time he tried to talk to Teenie. It was queer. It almost seemed as if Teenie were trying to see how uncomfortable she could make her home for herself and everybody else.

His evening paper failed to hold his attention. He laid it aside gladly when Lollie and young Jarrett came in.

"Cadwallader"—to her father's ear Lollie's voice seemed to dwell almost lovingly on the syllables—"Cadwallader has to tear himself away, Daddy."

"Must you?" Plimsoll was sincere in the protest. The more Lollie saw of this youngster, the better, whether or not there was any color of truth in poor Teenie's funny notions. "It's early."

"I'm afraid I must, sir. I make it a rule to do some reading every night. I'm working on Dr. Dellenbaugh's *International Finance,* just now, and I'd better get home and get at it or it'll be eleven before I start. I make it a hard and fast rule to put my light out sharp at eleven, every night except Saturday, sir."

"Daddy wouldn't dream of letting you break such perfect rules on my account," said Lollie. "Tell him it's all right for him to go, Daddy, or he'll be afraid to." She paused. "Cadwallader's got a perfectly tremendous respect for you, Daddy. He's been tell-

ing me about it ever since dinner. You mustn't weaken his good opinion of you by making him stay just to amuse me!"

Beaming, Plimsoll moved his hand in affable dismissal. Escorted as far as the door of the room by Lollie, Mr. Jarrett, visibly treading air, departed. Lollie, to her father's joy, came back, lighted a companionable cigarette and reclined at ease in the deep chair that faced his own.

"Has mother gone to bed in tears, as usual?"

Plimsoll decided to be frank. You had, as Noonan said, to be buddies with 'em.

"I'm afraid your mother's not very well. She keeps worrying about"—he paused—"well, it's usually about you."

Lollie blew a perfectly circular little ring of smoke and impaled it neatly on the third finger of her left hand.

"What have I been doing this time?"

Again her father decided in favor of frankness.

"It's so silly I'm ashamed to repeat it, but she's got it into her head that you, well, that you liked that Dolliver boy, and she's afraid that"—he chuckled—"that absence may make you fonder, I suppose."

Lollie nodded, rather to his relief. He'd been afraid she might flare up, as she had every right to do.

"That's what I thought," she said. "Something she said at lunch sounded as if she actually believed I'd been furnishing that house out at Paradise Heights with some fantastic intention of"—she waved her hand as if to apologize for clothing the thought in words—"of settling down in it with Mrs. Dolliver's little darling!"

Plimsoll chuckled again.

"Of course I don't need to tell you, do I," said

Lollie, "that I'm not breaking my poor heart because that precious mama's pet has gone to India?"

"Well, you're not lifting any great weight off my mind," said Plimsoll. "From what I saw of Gilbert he didn't seem very likely to appeal to you."

"I should hope not! Why, he's awful! He's twenty-three years old and he does everything his mother tells him! He wouldn't dare breathe if she told him not to. It's just revolting!"

"I wish you could think of some way of persuading your poor mother that you aren't pining away because Mrs. Dolliver's raised her boy to be a yes-man," said Plimsoll.

Lollie blew another ring and again thrust through it the third finger of her left hand.

"She'll just have to outgrow it," she said. "But I'm glad you don't think I like that boy. Like him? Why, I'm almost sorry he's gone. I'd like to tell him just once how perfectly repellent I think he is. I'd like——"

She paused. Over her face there flowed the look of one who listens, unbelievingly, to distant angel choirs. Her father listened also. Beyond the windows that fronted on the drive he heard the unlovely sound of slatternly machinery.

Breathless, he saw the dawn of rapture transfigure his daughter's countenance, saw her spring up and hasten gladly to obey, before she heard it, the abysmal soughing, melancholy and yet triumphant, of an indubitable bassoon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE night brought counsel to Belden Plimsoll. By morning he had rallied strongly from the double shock of Gilbert's return and Lollie's unmistakable rejoicing in the event. From the high, unsteady summit of his horse, as he faced the perils of his early ride, he could see clearly that he had, as always, been altogether right.

He had Lollie's own emphatic word to reassure him as to her attitude toward Gilbert. She had spoken of him with contempt and aversion that had been visibly sincere. Her gladness when she heard his car, therefore, and rushed forth to heed the summonsing bassoon, must have been due to the uphoped-for repossession of a useful pawn.

To this conclusion as to a strong rock Plimsoll clung fast. Upon the firm foundation of that rock he set about the reconstruction of his defenses. For this purpose it was necessary to obtain, as soon as possible, full information from the front, and on that errand, clad in the boots and breeches of equitation, he tapped softly at his daughter's door.

A sleepy murmur bade him enter. Flushed with slumber the drowsy-lidded Lollie regarded him with the kindly amity of a graceful winner, and, although he was far from admitting defeat, it was as a good loser that he strove to bear himself.

"What happened?"

Lollie giggled sleepily.

"Gilbert," she said, "seems to have missed the boat."

It occurred to Plimsoll that he should have anticipated this. He knew Pansy. A just man, he blamed himself for having trusted overmuch in Noonan.

"I'm not surprised to hear it," he said. "Pansy will certainly be late for her own funeral."

"Oh, she didn't miss the boat. She's on it right now."

Plimsoll stared. "Then how did Gilbert happen to——"

"He says"—Lollie giggled again—"he says he just got off for a minute and that the ship started before he could get on again. That's his story, anyway, and he sticks to it."

Her voice and face left no room for doubt that she accepted the statement, herself, with a generous sifting of salt.

"You don't seem to believe it," said Plimsoll.

"Well, I don't think it was quite as accidental as all that. I have a sneaking idea that Gilbert missed that boat on purpose."

"Why should he?"

"I don't believe he was ever very crazy about being a Buddhist priest, and naturally he'd want to stay here, too."

"Why?"

"Why, father! I'm surprised that you should ask that! Wouldn't anybody want to stay in Lakeport? Isn't it the Queen City of the whole Saugahatch Basin, where nature, art and industry combine to make an earthly paradise, where skies are bluer, where life's worth living twice!"

Plimsoll's hand demanded a truce to impious persiflage. This was not the time or place for verbatim

quotation from the sacred writings of the Commerotary Club.

"Why should Gilbert want to stay here?" he said curtly.

"Well, besides the blue skies and the pure Artesian water," said Lollie thoughtfully, "there's his bassoon. He's terribly interested in that and he gets free lessons here, and a fine place to practice."

Plimsoll made a mental note. Here was one advantage of residing in Lakeport that could be summarily eliminated.

"And of course he can live here for almost nothing," said Lollie, "staying in his own house."

"I thought that was closed."

"It's really quite a weird coincidence." She sobered suddenly at the word. "Or perhaps it isn't a coincidence at all. Mr. Greminger says——"

"Never mind Greminger. Isn't the Dolliver house closed?"

"No. You see, Mrs. Dolliver left the keys with her cook, so that she could come in every now and then to sweep and dust and Zenia—that's the cook—decided afterwards that it would be more convenient if she and her husband just stayed right in the house so they're both there to look after Gilbert. Isn't it queer that it should happen that way? Mr. Greminger would say that it was *meant*."

In spite of his immense contempt for puny destiny Belden Plimsoll knew a moment of dark, superstitious fear. He shook it from him sternly.

"Isn't he going to India at all, then? Does he intend to hang around here?"

"Yes. He——"

"What about his mother?"

"Oh, of course she's trying to make him catch the

next steamer and meet her at Marseilles. She keeps sending him wireless telegrams, but he's behaving perfectly splendidly about that."

"Oh, is he?"

"Yes. He's not going to pay any attention to those telegrams. He's going to live his own life and stop letting his mother boss him around like a baby. He's perfectly splendid about it."

"I thought you said he was——"

"That was when I thought he didn't have any self-respect at all. Of course I'd despise a man who let his mother treat him like a kind of a live doll, but when he came back and I found out he'd decided to live his own life, why, of course, I was crazier about him than ever."

Plimsoll was not deceived. The game of bluff, he knew, had been resumed, and at this game two could play.

"That interests me," he said. "What is there about him that makes you crazy, Lollie?"

Lollie reflected deeply.

"It's hard to say. For one thing he can have a good time without trying. He—he just has it. Most boys have to go to a frightful lot of trouble to enjoy themselves, and expect a girl to work twice as hard as they do to see that they're happy, but Gilbert just likes what he's doing, where he is. It's terribly restful."

"I see. He impresses you as a born gentleman of leisure."

"Yes. That's just what I mean. You do understand me so marvelously, father! Gilbert's different from anybody else I ever met. He's a *real* gentleman of leisure. And there aren't many of them in the world and almost none at all in the United States."

"You're wrong about that. The country's overrun with 'em."

"Not like Gilbert. Of course there are lots of Americans who don't work, but that isn't what I mean. They make work out of their loafing; they play golf or polo or poker or bridge just the way their grandfathers used to build railroads or sell groceries. Gilbert's the only boy I know who can have a good time without working at it."

Plimsoll was relieved rather than alarmed. Lollie had gone too far. It would need a better actress than she was to persuade Belden Plimsoll that a daughter of his could admire idleness and uselessness as arts and virtues.

"You seem to have a low opinion of work," he said.

"It's all right if you have to do it," Lollie conceded, "or if it's the only thing you know how to do, but why anybody should work when they don't either want to or have to is a mystery to me. What's the sense of it?"

It was a point which did not impress Plimsoll as worthy of debate.

"I don't see how that applies to Gilbert," he said. "I'll admit that he doesn't like to work and that he wouldn't be any good at it, but how about having to? With his mother so far away, he won't be able to sponge on her little income, the way he's always done, and——"

"Oh, I don't believe Gilbert will ever have to work for money," said Lollie.

"Why not?"

"Because he's so perfectly sure to marry somebody with a lot of it, of course."

It would have been a deep thrust if Plimsoll had not been armored against it. He did not even wince.

"What makes you so sure of that? I'll grant you that he's exactly the sort to want a rich wife and be perfectly content to have her support him, but how do you figure that he's bound to get one?"

"Because he's just the boy to appeal to a girl whose —whose father, say, has never done anything except make money. Don't you see that? The men she'd know would all be—go-getters, and there wouldn't be any need for another go-getter in her life. She'd want to marry somebody who didn't have to keep his nose on the grindstone, getting more money; she'd want somebody who could enjoy life without spending most of it in an office and the rest of it going after pleasure just as busily and tiresomely."

"And so, of course, she'd choose a perfectly useless, lazy, good-for-nothing grafter like——"

"I think she'd be pretty sure to like somebody like Gilbert," said Lollie brazenly. "He's so perfectly happy with his funny old car and his funny old bassoon and——"

"His funny old mother?"

Plimsoll put a relentless finger on the weak point.

"Of course, she's pretty terrible," Lollie conceded, "but I don't believe she'll bother Gilbert very much, by the time this trip's over."

"Why not?"

Lollie's face sobered. "It's really weird, father. Just think of the chances against things happening the way they have! There's poor old Cousin Arthur Timlow, perfectly mad about Mrs. Dolliver for years and years, and never having any money except what he could wheedle out of you, and there's Mrs. Dolliver, so wrapped up in bossing Gilbert around that she didn't feel the need of somebody else to manage, and

all at once they're on the same boat, and both going to India, and poor Cousin Arthur's managed to get a splendid position, with loads of money to spend, and just to make things absolutely perfect, Gilbert misses the boat!" She paused to laugh softly. "And one of the reasons why he got off the boat, he told me, was because poor Cousin Arthur was on it! He just can't be bothered to hate people, usually, but for some reason he simply can't *bear* poor Cousin Arthur. Isn't it perfectly uncanny, father? Don't you think that maybe Mr. Greminger's right, and that things couldn't happen this way unless they were meant?"

Plimsoll made no answer. Lollie pounded her pillow flat.

"I almost believe it, anyway. I don't believe Gilbert was meant to go to India. I think he couldn't have gone if he'd wanted to."

"You do, eh? You work it out that Destiny has some other designs for him, do you? What, for instance?"

"I think he was meant to be a nice, comfortable country gentleman or something like that." Lollie's eye dwelt on the boots and breeches. "I just know he'd look simply gorgeous in riding clothes."

Her father glanced downward at his breeches and boots. There had been no criticism implied in Lollie's tone and yet he was aware of a vague dissatisfaction with an appearance that had hitherto been the chief redeeming feature of horsemanship.

"Let's hope," he said, "that it works out that way. It would be a pity to spoil him, I can see, by anything so dull and vulgar as work."

"I just knew you'd understand," said Lollie gratefully. "I'm so glad we've had this talk, too. It's

made me realize how I feel about Gilbert. I didn't know, before."

She pillowed her cheek, closed her eyes and returned to slumbers manifestly untroubled. Her father, after a moment, accepted this dismissal and quietly left the room.

By dint of exceeding caution he bathed, dressed and descended to his Spartan breakfast without waking Albertine, and was thus able to defer, for the present, an interview for which he felt strongly disinclined.

His first action, at the office, was to telephone to Noonan, whose disclaimers of responsibility for the disaster he cut resolutely short, bidding the detective, curtly, to resume at once his professional activities in respect to Gilbert Dolliver.

The conversation gave him a soothing sense of cunning and of action. He was able to turn his attention to the documents on his desk, documents sifted out by efficient system from the mass of matters undeserving of the august eye of a chief executive. Only one of these, this morning, seemed to demand immediate and personal notice, however, and this was a telegram dealing with affairs wholly unrelated to the Intercontinental Adding Machine Co. It was a wireless message, transmitted from the steamship *Campestre.*

> TERRIBLY ANXIOUS ABOUT GILBERT HE MISSED BOAT AND HAS RETURNED HOME AM DEPENDING ON YOU TO TAKE CARE OF HIM AND SEE THAT HE TAKES FIRST STEAMER MARSEILLES PLEASE TELEGRAPH DAILY DREADFULLY WORRIED.
>
> PANSY

Plimsoll drew in a deep breath. Summoning a taxi-cab he bore his written warrant resolutely northward along the boulevard to Elmwood Park.

Although, indirectly, he was paying the cost of their transmission, he did not even count the superfluous words of Pansy's message.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ALTHOUGH his sleep had been refreshing, although the July morning was serene, although his breakfast was pleasingly unvegetarian and there was no need of haste or caution as to its consumption, Gilbert Dolliver's sense of well-being was not complete.

He did not know what it was that cast a shadow upon his spirit, and he did not try to find out. He was willing to think when the process was reasonably automatic, but he had no taste for effort, mental or other, that could be avoided. He was merely conscious, without being thereby stirred to active meditation, that life was slightly less than perfect.

To Zenia and the Perfessor, as he ate, he lent an absent attention. Both had been displeased by his return and both were firmly of the opinion that duty demanded obedience to the mounting sheaf of wireless messages from his mother.

"Whut go happen ifn you doan conduck youse'f good an' mine you mama?" The Perfessor employed his pulpit manner. "I tell you whut go happen—you mama she go come spang back yere 'n' have em hot tax, nen you boun' to go Inja anyhow. 'At whut go happen."

Gilbert continued to eat.

"Evveybody be bettuh ifn you dess conduck youse'f nice an' do like you mama say," urged the Perfessor. "You mama she git out'n havin' nem hot tax, so *she* bettuh off. You be doin' right by you mama, so you day be long innuh lan', so *you* bettuh off, an' me an'

Zenia doan' got to move out an' pay rent, so *we* bettuh off."

Gilbert shook his head. The Perfessor's logic was flawless, but the fact remained that the benefits of disobedience were immediate, its penalties remote.

"Maybe she won't come right back," he said hopefully.

"'At fool talk! She boun' come back."

It seemed highly probable to Gilbert but he clung to hope. Mama had acted kind of funny on the train and on the boat; for some reason the change in her inclined him to a faint belief that she might even go on to India without him. Somewhere in this thought Mr. Timlow was obscurely involved, and for the first time Gilbert felt that perhaps even Mr. Timlow might have his good points.

"Well, she can't come back for quite a while," he said comfortably. "And lots of things might happen before then."

"Whut kine uh thing?"

Gilbert moved his hand vaguely. It was not a matter to be discussed even with a guide, philosopher and friend so near and trusted as the Perfessor, but it could be thought about. This was singular, too. He was slightly shocked to discover he could consider, as perhaps the lesser of two evils, as something that, in the last ditch, a desperate man might actually choose, that narrow, perilous, revolting avenue of escape from filial bondage which the Perfessor himself had pointed out.

If there was no other way of getting out of going to India, you could get married.

It was still, of course, a forbidding, abhorrent alternative, and yet in the very horror of it he found a kind of morbid fascination.

"A lot of things might happen," he repeated, rising. "You can't tell."

He moved forth to the amiable warmth of the porch. Here, outstretched in a wicker chair profoundly cushioned, he lighted a cigarette and surrendered himself to that effortless enjoyment of which Lollie Plimsoll had spoken so admiringly.

The shadow, however, continued to overcloud his skies. Something was missing, something to which usage had schooled him. The awareness of its absence was not wholly unpleasant: it was strange, merely, and therefore disturbing. It was something like the way he had felt when he descended to immobile earth after fifty cents' worth of continuous riding on a merry-go-round. He missed something very much as a freed convict might miss barred windows and bolted doors.

He seemed to be listening for something, something he knew he would not hear. It was not the buzz of the door bell, for this sound only annoyed him when it intruded upon his notice. He was still frowning vaguely when Zenia brought him word that a visitor desired speech with him.

"'At same biggy li'l man 'at uz yere befo'," said Zenia. "Say he name Simspon."

Gilbert's frown deepened. He had not forgiven Belden Plimsoll; it was no fault of Plimsoll's that he wasn't on his way to India right now, playing pachisi with Mr. Timlow. Getting even with people was too much trouble, but he was aware, as he rose, of a wish that there were some nice, easy way of getting even with this meddler. The desire deepened as he submitted to a forceful handshake, as he endured the condescending, senile affability so difficult to bear, when one is at the prime of life, from a ridiculous Tithonus of fifty.

It would be nice if there were some way of removing, without too much effort, that fatuous, patronizing grin.

"Lollie told me you missed your boat," said Plimsoll briskly, "and I've just had a wireless from your mother. She wants me to see that you get the next steamer and overtake her at Marseilles, so I came right out to arrange things. You can catch the *Andalusia* tomorrow morning and——"

"I'm not going."

Gilbert was gratified to perceive that he had already lessened the offensive cheerfulness of that beaming grin. Plimsoll clearly wanted him to go, and the knowledge gave him another reason for staying.

"Lollie told me you didn't want to," said Plimsoll, stubbornly amiable, "but you must consider your mother, Gilbert. You surely don't want to make her give up this trip, when you know how she's been looking forward to it."

Gilbert coughed. "She doesn't have to give it up," he said.

"But you know she will, unless you go with her. And you certainly wouldn't want her to go all the way to India alone, would you?"

"She's got lots of company without me," said Gilbert. He scowled. "Lots."

Rather clumsily, perhaps for want of previous experience, his visitor stooped to wheedle and persuade. Merely by shaking his head, Gilbert discovered, it was possible to enjoy a pleasing sense of getting even. His spirits rose when Plimsoll unmistakably ran out of patience.

"Very well, then." The voice was angry. "Have it your own way."

"I'm going to," said Gilbert cheerfully. "That's how I like it."

His caller compressed his lips.

"Then there's just one more thing I've got to say. If you take this attitude you aren't welcome at my house. Understand?"

Gilbert regarded him with quickened interest.

"I've never been in your house."

"You know what I mean."

"If you're talking about Lollie," Gilbert began.

"I am. At least I'm serving notice on you that I don't wish the—the acquaintance to continue. I mean just that."

Gilbert coughed twice.

"You better tell Lollie about it, I guess," he said.

"I will. Don't make any mistake about that."

Plimsoll bit off the words, glared briefly, wheeled and marched away. Gilbert's eye followed him, as far as the door, with pleased interest. For some reason the shadow that had darkened his morning humor seemed now to lift and thin. He dedicated some moments to serene reflection and then, moving almost briskly, approached the telephone.

Zenia called to him from the kitchen as he rattled at the hook.

"You ain't go git nobody onnat tellyfoam. You mama git it tu'ned off."

Gilbert frowned. Again he submitted his mind to meditation.

"I suppose I'll have to get out the car, then," he said aloud.

He had resigned himself to the effort involved in this procedure and was on the point of starting for the garage when the peaceful silence was shattered by a succession of yelping hoots, impatient and per-

emptory, from the street. He paused. The honking was repeated. It constrained him to go to the front door, whence he could see that the noise emanated from a small but inviting runabout parked before the horseblock and occupied by Lollie.

Gilbert coughed three times. As he went forth in obedience to commands now recognizable as addressed to him, he discovered that the shadow had almost vanished.

"I've been trying to telephone you for hours," said Lollie sharply, "but that stupid central kept trying to tell me that your house was closed, so I had to come around after you. Get in."

Gilbert hesitated. The flaw in life's completeness had gone. He had returned to the natural, familiar state of one under authority, but he wasn't altogether sure that he was entitled to enjoy it.

"Look," he said. "Your father was just here, Lollie, and he——"

Lollie's eye brightened. "What for?"

"Well, he was trying to make me take another boat and catch up with mama, and when I wouldn't he got sort of sore at me and said he wouldn't let us be acquainted any more. You and me, I mean. So maybe you better not——"

"The idea!" said Lollie indignantly. "You get right into this car!"

Imperatively she unlatched the door. Gilbert, with a comforting sense of usage, surrendered to his habit of obedience. He climbed in. The cloud was almost gone.

"It's a funny thing," he said, settling himself pleasantly on shoulder blade and hip. "I kind of got the idea, while your father was talking, to call you up and see if you were doing anything. I was trying to get

you on the wire, I guess, about the same time you must have been trying to get me."

"Why, that's another coincidence! How perfectly weird!" Lollie reflected soberly. "Or maybe it was meant—the way Mr. Greminger says."

"Yeh. Maybe." Gilbert lapsed contentedly into comfort undisturbed by mental activity, but Lollie continued visibly to meditate.

"Did you really want to play around with me, Gilbert?"

Gilbert thought it over.

"Well, I don't know as you could call it wanting to," he said, "but after what your father said I thought I wouldn't mind being around with you. Not much, anyway."

"Oh," said Lollie in her ice-cream voice. "And do you mind very much, now you're doing it?"

Again Gilbert pondered.

"Why, no," he admitted. "I guess I don't."

His eye rose to the bit of mirror at the top of the windshield, a mirror now reflecting, at the wheel of a dusty, small sedan, the dished, blue-chinned countenance that banished the last remnant of the shadow.

"Look, Lollie!" He sat up. "The detective's after me again!"

Lollie looked. Her lips tightened a little.

"Why, so he is," she said. She spoke with a hint of grimness that Gilbert, in a contentment now made perfect, did not even notice.

"Where'll we go?" he asked. He was reconciled to Lollie's company; it was convenient to have somebody at hand who was able and willing to decide things.

"I thought we might go out to Paradise Heights so that you could see how perfectly adorable the house

looks in the daytime," said Lollie, "but it's pretty late, and we might as well get lunch first."

"Oke," said Gilbert. "Where?"

Lollie turned a corner with abruptness and determination.

"Oh, let's go home," she said.

For some reason this proposal, which yesterday he would have instantly rejected, found favor in Gilbert's sight. There was something about the house on East Hill that was definitely inviting. Since this morning, somehow, the thought of Belden Plimsoll's house had become associated with a number of pleasant things, things such as cigarettes and meat and musically clicking dice, all of which, by a curious coincidence, lay under the ban of prohibition.

"Fine!" said Gilbert heartily.

At his presidential desk Belden Plimsoll dictated two wireless telegrams. One of these was addressed to Mrs. Pansy Dolliver, on board the steamship *Campestre.*

> GILBERT ABSOLUTELY REFUSES FOLLOW YOU URGENTLY ADVISE YOUR IMMEDIATE RETURN.

He was not altogether satisfied with the wording, which offended against the office rule of thrift in telegraphic communications, but he let it pass. It would certainly bring Pansy home, and this was all that mattered.

Not, he told himself, that he was worried about Gilbert's puzzling defiance of authority or his obstinate insistence upon staying in Lakeport. He was sending

for Pansy simply as a disciplinary measure. Pansy would attend to Gilbert!

The other message had a double purpose. There was now no reason for spending good money on sending Arthur Timlow to India, and, if Albertine happened to be right, Pansy might be more willing to come straight home from Marseilles if she knew that Cousin Arthur had also been obliged to abandon the Indian pilgrimage.

Thinking the matter over, however, Plimsoll decided not to recall Timlow directly to Lakeport. Probably Albertine was wrong in that notion of hers that there was anything more than friendship between Pansy and Cousin Arthur, but it was just as well to run no risks. It would be a pity if Pansy, in the propinquity of shipboard and the distress of mind caused by Gilbert's disobedience, should throw herself away on a fellow like Cousin Arthur. A great pity. Pansy had trouble enough on her hands without having a husband to support.

PLANS CHANGED PROCEED LONDON
NEW INSTRUCTIONS OUR OFFICE THERE.

These steps, however, left him discontented. He wanted more immediate action and, after a little thought, was happily inspired. He rang for Gifford.

"Get in touch with a man named Fenstermacher who's night-watchman out at the old piano plant and tell him he's fired if anybody gets inside without a personal permit from me."

Gifford, quivering, embraced the precious command and allowed his soundless machinery to remove him. Belden Plimsoll leaned back in his chair.

As far as Gilbert Dolliver was concerned there would henceforth be one less reason for finding that life, in the Queen City of the Saugahatch Basin, was, as the slogan of the Commerrotary Club averred, worth living twice.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

UNPROVOKED activity of any sort was wholly foreign to Gilbert Dolliver's fixed habit, and this was especially true of the efforts of mind, larynx and lip required for conversation. Very early in life he had discovered that silence was not only more comfortable than speech but also was one of those few qualities of his with which no fault was found by others.

In the passive sense, therefore, he had cultivated it. The usefulness of a cough became apparent to him long before the epic occasion when his curls were shorn. A cough satisfied the most assiduous of questioners, even those who took issue with such neutral words as Yeh and Uhuh.

The adventure of the luncheon table, however, had moved him deeply, and as he rode swiftly out along the Egandale Road beside Lollie, he departed from his custom and made uninvited remark.

"I certainly liked your mother, Lollie."

"That's nice." Lollie was pleased. "Everybody does, though."

"Yeh, I guess they would. She doesn't keep talking all the time."

The tribute was conservatively worded. During luncheon Mrs. Plimsoll had spoken in all eight times, and of these speeches five had been addressed, in a stunned undertone, to maidservants in waiting, and none of the remaining three had been completed, the lady's voice suddenly forsaking her, on each occasion,

in midsentence. Even Gilbert, under active incitement by Lollie, had seemed, in comparison with his hostess, almost garrulous.

"I certainly liked her a lot better than I expected," he said.

"I'll tell her so," said Lollie. "It'll please her, because she's awfully fond of you, too."

"Yeh. That's what I thought."

Gilbert's experience had taught him that people who didn't like him usually did a lot of talking about it. Silence he interpreted as approval, and he leaned back to enjoy the unfamiliar sensation. His regard for Lollie's mother became, by the time they reached the beckoning billboard gates of Paradise, one of those established attitudes of mind which, having once adopted, he never bothered to change.

This friendliness extended itself to Lollie and to Lakeport's Most Exclusive Homesite Subdivision. He surveyed Paradise Heights Manor with approval.

"It's nice," he said. "They picked out a good name for it, too. You know it wouldn't be a bad place to live, Lollie."

Lollie assented blithely, bringing the car to a halt before the model house. There was no need for her latch key, for the door stood wide and in the aperture, his face transfigured with awed gladness, was Mr. Greminger.

It was not Mr. Greminger's use to inspect the teeth of gift horses bestowed upon him by Destiny. He accepted Gilbert's presence with simple gratitude and joy and made no inquiry whatever into its causes.

"He isn't going to India, after all," said Lollie. "He missed the boat."

Mr. Greminger's golden molars glittered.

"And I suppose," he said, "that there's dimwits who'd claim *that* was juss a quincidence!"

His eye rested thoughtfully upon Gilbert for a moment, and then shifted to Lollie.

"They're hanging those drapes in the guess room. I don't know if they're getting 'em juss the way you want."

Lollie slipped past him and scurried up the stairs. Mr. Greminger turned upon Gilbert the undivided powers of his pers'nality.

"You got back juss in time," he declared, lowering his voice. "Some Pittsburgh parties went through this prop'ty this morning. They're coming back at ha-pass three and you know how Pittsburgh parties are, I guess."

Gilbert had learned that when people looked and spoke in this fashion it saved trouble to assume a slightly saddened look, to shake one's head and cough regretfully.

"You're juss in time," said Mr. Greminger. "Another coupla hours and this house 'd belong to those Pittsburgh parties and that'd juss about break the little lady's heart."

More sincerely, now, Gilbert's countenance and cough evinced concern. Hearts ought to be handled with care. He felt that it would be a pity if anything happened to Lollie's.

"You know how I dope out this life prop'sition," said Mr. Greminger. "The way I look at it, when a thing's meant, it ought to happen, and I guess you can see for yourself that it was meant for you to own this prop'ty."

Gilbert coughed. He felt that Mr. Greminger, after nineteen years of signal success in these matters, ought to know whereof he spoke.

"Now you gotta admit, man to man, that I haven't tried to strong-arm you into this deal, but I can't hold it open later than ha-pass three. I'll take twenny-seven five from you, and thass two-five less 'n I can get from those Pittsburgh parties, but you gotta act quick."

Obscurely, now, it became evident to Gilbert that he was under invitation to buy a house, furnished, for a figure that must be twenty-seven thousand five hundred dollars.

"If you want me to buy it," he said, "it's no use. I haven't got the money."

"Did I say anything about money?" demanded Mr. Greminger sternly. "Man to man, have I named the word as much as once? Have I?"

Gilbert was obliged to admit that he had not.

"Then wait till I do," said Mr. Greminger. "Wait till I ast you for a thin dime! You think a high-class subdivision prop'sition like Paradise Heights Manor Park Gardens Estates op'rates on any cheap-john cash basis? Juss to show you, I'm gonna take you down to the office and give you a warranty deed to this prop'ty without it cossing you a nickel!"

He placed a propulsive hand beneath Gilbert's elbow.

"We'll have it all fixed up by the time the little lady gess through with those guess room drapes," he whispered. "Less go!"

Willingly, now, Gilbert went. He still felt vaguely that there was a catch in all this, but it would do no harm to make sure. Under Mr. Greminger's guidance, however, he had only to write his name several times in blank spaces left conveniently open for that very purpose in documents already prepared. Mr. Greminger's assistant, a long, birdlike youth who wore horn-rimmed spectacles and smelled pleasantly of

wintergreen gum, also wrote his name upon the papers, as did a young lady stenographer. These formalities completed, he was assured by Mr. Greminger that he stood possessed of the two acres of land, the house and all it contained.

In proof and token of this he was invited to pocket one of the documents, formidably wafered and rubber banded. Mr. Greminger, still making no reference to money, ceremonially shook hands.

"Lemme congratchlate the firss prop'ty owner in the finess homesite prop'sition in the state."

"It's mine, is it?"

Assured that it was, Gilbert began to believe it. Owning a house was a singularly pleasant affair. It made a person feel just like other people; doing business, too, was better fun and less trouble than he had imagined, and it also had the agreeable effect of making one seem usual and regular.

"I always thought you had to have money to buy houses," he admitted.

"You don't need cash," said Mr. Greminger, "when you got somepin better. You got credit, thass what you got, an' all the high-class business in the world gess hanneled on credit, same as we hanneled this deal. Crediss what makes the world go round—credit an'——" he winked—"an' love."

Gilbert coughed. The birdy young man and the stenographer were both smiling at him, as if there were some amusing connection between him and the second of the rotative influences named by Mr. Greminger.

"I better go tell her about it," he said.

"Lissen." Mr. Greminger stopped him. "Why don't you wait till she gess it furnished juss the way she wants it an' then tell her? Juss for a supprise?"

The suggestion appealed to Gilbert. For some rea-

son secrecy seemed to heighten the pleasing sensation of owning prop'ty. It imparted a kind of thrill to the otherwise unexciting process of sitting in the deep, denim-covered chair in the library and waiting for Lollie to finish with the guest room drapes. She didn't know whose drapes she was fussing over. Maybe she wouldn't fuss over them if she knew; maybe it would spoil the fun she seemed to be getting out of it, and that would be a pity.

It was after four when she was willing to depart. Gilbert was glad that the Pittsburgh parties didn't come. If they'd showed up it might have been impossible to keep Lollie from finding out who owned the prop'ty.

He held his peace successfully during the homeward drive. Lollie set him down in front of his house.

"I'll be around for you kind of early," he said, without waiting as he usually did for Lollie's instructions to this effect. She waggled her arm cheerfully and drove away.

Two more wireless messages had arrived during his absence, but, following a practice which he had found useful in the past, he did not open them. Very often, he had discovered, if you didn't meet troubles on the doorstep, they got tired of waiting and went away.

When, after a leisured dinner, he went out to the garage, the old car refused to start. Patience, for once, went profitless. After an hour of experiment the weary battery declined to trouble any further the stupor of the cylinders. Gilbert frowned as he went down the alley to the street. It was a long walk over to East Hill, and there wouldn't be much chance of picking up a taxi on the way, and yet, for some reason, it seemed necessary to go over there.

He came to a sudden stand at the sight of the dusty

little sedan parked near the alley's mouth. Thrice, thoughtfully, he coughed. Then, cheerfully, he approached the blue-jawed man who sat behind the wheel.

"Look," he said. "I got to get over to East Hill and my car won't start. You don't happen to be going that way, do you?"

The blue-chinned man shifted the bitten stub of a cigar and surveyed him briefly.

"That's funny," he said. "I was just going over that way myself. Hop in."

On the way, while Gilbert uncased his bassoon, there was opportunity for conversation. This, when the trumpet blast had brought Lollie forth to the driveway before the Gothic manor house, Gilbert condensed for her enlightenment.

"This is Mr. Noonan, Lollie. My car wouldn't start and I was afraid I'd have to walk over, but a funny thing happened. I asked Mr. Noonan for a lift and it turns out that he's just driving around for fun. He's got insomnia and can't sleep, so he just drives around no place in particular, and he says he'd just as lief run us out to Egandale as not."

Lollie hesitated, giggled softly, slipped into the back seat, where Gilbert followed her.

"You're perfectly marvelous, Gilbert!" she whispered. "I don't believe there's anybody like you in the world!"

"Oh, I guess there is." Gilbert was dimly displeased by the suggestion. "I guess I'm not so different as you think."

"You're just too marvelous," Lollie repeated. He coughed and frowned. Maybe it had been a mistake to use the detective as a sort of unpaid chauffeur. He remembered Lollie's uncomfortable way of pretending,

when the blue-chinned man was within earshot, to be affectionate. He hadn't thought of this before, and he waited, uneasily, for her to begin calling him darling and talking about long winter evenings and getting married.

Lollie, however, seemed to overlook the opportunity. She didn't say much of anything. Gilbert began to be aware of one of those departures from established routine which always made him uneasy. Not, of course, that he *wanted* Lollie to pretend that she was cow-eyed about him, but—well, it was kind of funny that all at once she should stop doing it.

He kept thinking about it all the way out to the piano works. It got mixed up, somehow, with other thoughts—thoughts that remembered the Perfessor's explanations as to escaping from filial obedience and were concerned, for no apparent reason, with the house in Paradise Heights. If Lolly knew who owned that house she'd certainly begin talking about living there in long winter evenings. He was tempted to tell her, but decided not to. Mr. Greminger probably knew what he was talking about, and he had been quite positive that Lollie would enjoy being surprised.

Presently, however, Lollie remembered. She didn't say anything, to be sure, but her hand, encountering Gilbert's as if by accident, did not withdraw. It remained in contact with his fingers, which closed comfortably and gently, of their own accord, about its pleasant warmth and softness.

Thus, in a singularly agreeable silence, they came to the piano works and the dismal tidings that waited for them there. Through a wire-netted window Mr. Fenstermacher was regretful but immovable.

"I can't take any chances on this job," he insisted.

"You bring me a written permit from B. V. Plimsoll or I got to keep you out."

"I'll make father give us a permit," said Lollie, as the sedan shuffled away along the lane. Gilbert, however, felt less confidence. He had no faith whatever in Belden Plimsoll as a source of benevolence. Suddenly a bright light broke in upon his gloom.

"I know what I'll do," he announced. "I'll go down town the first thing tomorrow morning and buy that factory from your father. It's for sale."

"Buy it? But you can't. You haven't got the money."

"I got something better," said Gilbert. "I got credit, and that's what you need in business. I'll bet you I'll own that factory by this time tomorrow night."

Lollie patted his hand soothingly. Her laugh, he felt, was tainted with disbelief.

"You wait and see, that's all. You think I can't do it, but I'll show you."

"You're marvelous," said Lollie. "I mean you are, really."

"Didn't I tell you I could ride right in the same car with 'em and not get spotted?"

Mr. Noonan spoke with pardonable pride and his lips closed firmly on the belted cigar that had already rewarded his report.

"I've got it framed up with Gilly to drive him anywhere he wants to go, every night. It's the best job of tailing I ever pulled off, and I pulled a few fast ones, too. I can hear everything they say and there's no chance of them losing me, either."

Plimsoll nodded. He himself was pleased.

"What—did you happen to hear what they were talking about, last night?"

Noonan chuckled. "They didn't say much, going out, but coming back there was a lot of talk about how to fix things up so Gilly could keep on getting bassoon lessons out at the fact'ry. I had a hard time keeping from laughing right out loud at one line Gilly got off, Mr. Plimsoll. He's got it figured out that the best thing for him to do is to buy that fact'ry. He's coming in here this morning to close the deal with you."

He allowed himself the pleasure of the laughter which had been suppressed, with so much difficulty, last night.

"I pretty near choked. The young lady asks him where he's going to raise the money and he tells her, solemn as a owl, that he couldn't use money in a big deal like this. He's going to buy your piano works on credit. Can you tie that one? He honestly believes he's coming in here and buy that plant without putting up a nickel!"

Plimsoll sat up.

"And he's right!" he said. "That's exactly what he's going to do!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

TO THE informed and understanding visitor Belden Plimsoll's office had an atmosphere of majesty that was almost an aroma. It was a throne room, a justice seat, a temple enshrining power and dignity and wisdom, and of these attributes no one was more thoroughly aware than Belden Plimsoll himself.

Usage had schooled him to expect of all who stood before him here the instinctive attitude of the overawed. None entered to him except the underlings he ruled and dominated, the members of his family who were, of course, even more completely under thrall, the occasional seeker for employment or other favor whose luck or merit had led him past the vigilant and jealous guardians of the gate. His equals—he admitted theoretically the possibility of equals—seemed never to visit him. As for superiors, he would have smiled—for even blasphemy may have its comic aspects—at the word.

He was, therefore, affronted and dimly shocked by Gilbert Dolliver's bearing, when the hushed, breathless reverence of Gifford ushered that young man to the audience chamber. Gilbert, entering, displayed no consciousness whatever of the majesty that confronted and enveloped him. He might have been a vandal in a Roman fane, glancing about him with barbarian curiosity but wholly without humility or seemly awe. His aspect and manner, indeed, suggested to Belden Plimsoll words spoken in an unguarded Ethiopian

undertone: Gilbert looked and behaved as if he saw here only a little man who acted kind of biggy.

It was necessary for Plimsoll to abstain from rebuking and punishing this disrespect; the unwonted effort of dissembling quickened his purpose and stiffened it. He achieved a smile, but his facial muscles creaked under the strain of it and his voice, in spite of his intention, was harsh with effort.

"Well, Gilbert? What is it?"

Gilbert inspected the stiff-backed chairs, chose one, seated himself and stirred Plimsoll to unwilling envy by instantly achieving a posture of indisputable comfort. Lollie, Plimsoll thought, had been right in one respect at least, about this boy: he had a talent for being comfortable that was almost genius.

"Business," said Gilbert. "I came to buy that piano factory."

He spoke so casually that it was difficult for Plimsoll to remember and believe that he was dealing with an artless innocent and not a man of affairs, affairs so vast that the purchase of a factory was hardly worth mentioning.

"That's interesting," he said. "What do you want with a factory, Gilbert? Thinking of going into business?"

Gilbert coughed. He appeared to consider with interest a suggestion wholly novel.

"I might. I kind of like business. But right now I just want to buy the piano works. Let's sign the papers. I've got a lot of things to do today." He paused. "And maybe you have too," he continued politely.

"You aren't interested in the price, then? Or terms?" Plimsoll tried to keep his voice from sounding too ironic. Gilbert moved his hand.

"That's all up to you," he said, his tone implying that the explanation ought not to be required.

"I suppose that's so," said Plimsoll gravely. "The property's cheap at a hundred thousand, but I—I don't want to be hard on you, and I'd like to have you own it, so I'm going to give you a bargain. I'm going to sell you that plant for——" he paused to go through the facial movements of mental arithmetic—"for exactly forty-four thousand six hundred and thirty dollars."

Gilbert nodded. "All right. Let's sign the papers, then."

"And as to terms——"

"Credit," said Gilbert.

"You don't expect to make any cash payment at all?"

"Credit's better," said Gilbert.

"Yes, I suppose it is." Plimsoll reached into the drawer of his desk. During the interval between Noonan's departure and Gilbert's arrival two stenographers had been busy and McFetridge, at the bank, had been telephonically consulted. The documents were ready. Gilbert's glance gave a negligent approval to this businesslike preparedness. He rose and approached the desk.

"Where do I sign?"

Plimsoll put down a brief sedition on the part of conscience. He was doing this for Gilbert's own good as well as for Lollie's. The end wholly justified the means.

"Don't you want to read them before you sign?"

Conscience insisted on this concession. You might swindle a boy for his own good, but you hadn't any right to encourage him in bad business methods.

"Oh," said Gilbert kindly, "I guess you know how

to make them out right." He reached for the pen. Plimsoll's mouth hardened. He touched a button.

"Witnesses," he explained. Gilbert nodded approvingly. Gifford and an even more soundless comrade entered. The documents were signed and Gifford, with a curious implement like a pair of misshapen pliers, embossed a seal. The underlings, released by their master's nod, gratefully withdrew. Gilbert reached for the sealed document.

"Wait," said Plimsoll. "You don't get that quite yet. It's in escrow at the bank till the payment's completed, under this agreement of sale here."

"Oh." Gilbert looked doubtful.

"It's the way these things are handled," Plimsoll explained.

"But I've bought the factory."

"Oh, yes—you've bought it all right." Plimsoll was glad to speak emphatically.

"Then that's all right." Gilbert turned to go, stopped, came back. "I need something to show Mr. Fenstermacher. Something in writing or he won't let me in, he says."

Plimsoll scribbled briefly on a letterhead.

"This will fix that."

"Thanks." Gilbert pocketed the paper, coughed twice by way of farewell, and departed. Twelve minutes later Belden Plimsoll was in earnest conference with Mr. Archibald McFetridge at the bank.

McFetridge was displeased and shocked.

"I never thought you'd come down to petty larceny, B. V."

"You're right. This is just a way of tying up the young fool's money so that he can't feed it to the birds."

"Under this agreement," said McFetridge dryly,

tapping the paper, "he feeds it to you instead. And all he gets for it is your white elephant out there at Egandale. It's legal, but——"

"You certainly don't think I'm going to keep the boy's pennies, do you?"

"I'm listening," said McFetridge, still more dryly. The tone and look stung Plimsoll.

"I'll show you, if you feel that way about it. Draw up a trust agreement, right now, putting every cent that comes to me through this deal back into a life trust for the boy. Make it as irrevocable as you like and I'll sign it before I go!"

"But he'll have your factory for nothing if you do that," said McFetridge, more scandalized than before. Plimsoll laughed.

"Don't you believe it. He'll be glad to hand that plant back to me before next week and he'll thank me for taking it off his hands. You draw up that trust agreement, Mac, and leave the rest of it to me."

McFetridge drew a printed form from a drawer, filled it out thoughtfully, slid it to Plimsoll across the slide of the desk.

Plimsoll's eye raced down the lines. He signed.

"There! And now how about an apology or two, Mac. Petty larceny, is it?"

McFetridge shook his head.

"You can have the apology if you want it, but it's not coming to you. Larceny's bad enough, but this is worse."

"How's that?"

"This might cost you money," said McFetridge. "There's always a chance for a profit in larceny."

"It can't cost me money," said Plimsoll. "The worst that could happen would be that I lost my plant, and

you just called it a white elephant. But as long as you say it's foolish——"

He reached for the document. McFetridge, however, put it into a drawer.

"It's irrevocable," he said, more aridly than ever. Plimsoll laughed.

"You're businesslike, anyway."

"Yes," said McFetridge. "Even when I'm dealing with people that aren't. Especially, in fact. It's a sound rule, B. V. I recommend it to you."

"Thanks. I'll try it sometime." Plimsoll went out, chuckling. He was in high good humor with himself and he spent the rest of the morning in excellent spirits. At one o'clock, when the factory whistle announced the end of the Saturday half day, he drove home, still grinning.

Albertine seemed to have recovered her peace of mind. The serenity of her welcome deepened her husband's self-satisfaction. She was, he saw, beginning at last to realize that she might safely count on him to take care of Lollie. He was tempted to reassure her against remaining or reviving doubts by acquainting her with this morning's master stroke.

"That settles things," he concluded. "I don't mind telling you now, Teenie, that I was a little worried whenever I thought of the boy's getting hold of that much money, in a sudden lump. I know it's absurd, of course, but just the same I feel better to know that he—well, that he won't have money enough for—well, you know what I mean. No matter how clever and intelligent a woman is about everything else there's always a chance that she'll lose her head when it comes to judging men."

"Yes, that's so," Albertine admitted, rather to her husband's surprise. "We do. But I don't believe the

money would matter to Lollie if she liked a boy enough."

"Oh, she'd never lose her head so completely as all that! She'd know that you can't live on nothing."

"I mean that she'd naturally take it for granted that we'd take care of her," said Albertine. "She's always had everything she wanted, except that trolley car you just couldn't get for her birthday, when she was six. She'd be perfectly sure we'd support her."

Plimsoll thought it over. It was an unusually logical supposition, for Albertine. Lollie, knowing that her father was the very soul of generosity, would be warranted in thinking that whatever she might do his liberality would never fail her. He'd better have a talk with her about this, he decided, make it clear that there were uncrossable limits.

"I almost wish you hadn't done this," said Albertine. "It doesn't seem fair, somehow, and if Lollie finds out, it might——"

Plimsoll caught at the second objection.

"Might what?"

"Well, when she finds out that you've taken advantage of him this way, it might make her like him all the better. She'll be sorry for him and——"

"But I haven't taken advantage of him. It's the other way round. Don't you see that yet, Teenie? Listen. Let me make it clear, this time."

He explained patiently and at length, but Albertine's face did not altogether repent. Upon it, as he talked, there dawned the least tolerable of Albertine's expressions, that heretic look which said, more plainly and less bearably than words, that Albertine might have known, all along, that her husband would get the worst of the bargain.

It was less warranted and less endurable, just now, than ever, and Plimsoll resented it. He said so.

"Maybe I don't know anything about business," said Albertine, her tone implying that she reserved a private opinion on the point, "but you keep telling me that the factory's worth a hundred thousand dollars and you seem to think there's something very clever about selling it for forty-four thousand—and not getting that!"

Her husband sighed. "Don't try to understand it, Teenie. You'll only make your head ache. Just leave it to me."

Luncheon was announced before Albertine could answer. Lollie's place was vacant and Plimsoll inquired about this.

"She went off somewhere with Gilbert," said Albertine, carelessly. She lifted her head, as if struck by a sudden thought. "Why, that's what he must have been telling her!"

"What is?"

"He was excited about something. I couldn't hear what he said but his voice sounded pleased. He must have been telling her about getting that factory from you for nothing."

Plimsoll shrugged his shoulders. Nothing would be gained by reopening debate on this point. His finesse had been too subtle for poor Teenie ever to get it through her head.

"Lollie told him he was perfectly marvelous," said Albertine.

Even this Plimsoll accepted in silence. It didn't mean anything, except that his strategy had been too subtle for Lollie as it had been for her mother. So much the better, he decided.

Later, inspecting the bright prospect of harvest

from his dwarf apple trees, he discovered that the robins' nest was empty except for one of the fledglings, perched on its rim, and, watching and listening to the excited elder birds, he came presently to the conclusion that they were urging this last remaining child to try its wings.

He shook his head. The poor things didn't know that they were only teaching their progeny to desert them. They had worked themselves to death to rear their brood, and now, pathetically, they labored quite as desperately to bring about their own abandonment!

Plimsoll had no patience with the parent birds, although he reminded himself that they were nothing, after all, but creatures of blind instinct, and couldn't be expected to know any better.

CHAPTER THIRTY

OVER Egandale lay the flat, brassy heat of a midland summer morning, heat that had weight and substance and intention, a heat malevolent and cunning, designed to try men's souls. Within the shuttered dimness of the closed piano factory, however, the mellow profundity of a bassoon gave the thermometer the lie.

How-*fresh*-and-*cool*—this—*cell*ar—is;
My-*throne*-a-dusky—
cask—is!

Seated on an overturned piano case Lollie Plimsoll regarded the performer with admiring reverence. Youth, slimness, and the sleeveless, throatless, backless tennis dress in which these were technically clad, provided her with a beautiful immunity to heat. The heels of her absurd shoes tapped in time to the stately boomings of the bassoon. Her creamy little soprano, like a silver bubble floated on the breast of mighty, murmurous waters, sang the cheerful words of the fortunate basso, whose only task was to sit in subterranean coolness and drink away his cares.

Presently, however, the entertainment seemed to pall upon her. She slid down from the piano box and went upon a random exploration of the vast, resounding spaces at the back of the office. From this excursion she returned on dancing feet, her face illumined from within by the effulgence of inspiration. Its radi-

ance, as she stood before him, constrained Gilbert to pause in the midst of a particularly satisfying boom and arch one eyebrow interrogatively.

"I know what you ought to do with this factory, Gilbert. You ought to sell it. You could make a perfectly frightful lot of money."

Gilbert, frowning, shook his head. At the back of his mind there dwelt a mild wonder at the peculiar attitude, in this very matter, of Mr. Greminger and of Lollie's father. For some mysterious reason these successful business men preferred a few signed scraps of paper to such solid possessions as piano factories and model homes, completely furnished, in Paradise Heights, but Gilbert felt no sympathy whatever toward this view; like Omar, he wondered indulgently what they bought that could be half as precious as the stuff they sold.

"Don't want to sell," he said. "No sense to selling things."

He adjusted his lips to the infolded flatness of his art but Lollie's peremptory gesture halted him in the act of lifting the bassoon.

"You'll have to," she declared. "You can't afford to keep a place like this."

"Why can't I?" The conviction of her voice disturbed him vaguely. Thus far, to be sure, possession had been as free of expense as acquisition, but Lollie certainly sounded as if she knew what she was talking about.

"Because you'll have to pay taxes and interest and things like that, of course!" Lollie spoke impatiently. "It costs a frightful lot of money to own things."

Gilbert coughed gloomily. The unwelcome information thrust itself upon his reluctant belief. There had been a fuss, every year, about taxes on the house

in Elmwood Park. Evidently there was a catch in the seemingly pleasant business of owning property; evidently Lollie's father had been less generous and obliging than he had seemed; maybe even Mr. Greminger's motives hadn't been altogether disinterested. Probably there would be taxes and things to be paid even on the house in Paradise Heights.

Footsteps beyond the open door disturbed these dark reflections. Gilbert swung about, frowning, to challenge the intruder. His frown, however, abated a little at the sight of the man who stood in the doorway, a neat, dapper man clad crisply in Palm Beach raiment, wearing a conservatively blocked Panama and rimless eyeglasses that winked and glinted in the inslant of brazen sun.

There was something about this man that was dimly disarming, something distantly and not unpleasantly familiar. Gilbert, returning the inspection of the shining lenses, coughed affably by way of greeting.

"Good-morning," said the neat man briskly. "Who's in charge here?"

Gilbert coughed again. "I guess I am," he said. The stranger seemed pleased. He came in, removing the Panama and revealing gray hair parted in the middle and sleekly burnished. Gilbert's vaguely agreeable feeling of familiarity became more definite. Somewhere, long ago, he had seen this man before.

"Good!" The newcomer replaced his hat, withdrew a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and deftly polished his glasses. "I'd like to look around, if it's all right."

Gilbert nodded, making with the bassoon a large, consenting gesture. Upon the instrument the caller's gaze dwelt with unmistakable approval.

"It's the best of them all—the bassoon," he said.

"You play it?" Gilbert's liking deepened. The other shook his head.

"Never could manage it. I play the piccolo. My brother used to be a wonder with a bassoon, though, before he——" he paused, frowned. "I'll just look over the plant," he said, reverting to the briskness of his earlier manner. "Don't let me disturb you." His eye, dwelling upon Lollie, softened a little, and he smiled. "Go right on playing—I can find my way around all right."

He waved a friendly hand and disappeared beyond the doorway leading to the factory. Lollie's gesture again halted Gilbert in the act of resuming the cheerful song of cool cellars and dusky casks.

"He wants to buy the works," she whispered tensely, nodding diagonally with fervent conviction. "I just know that's what he's after!"

Her hand squeezed Gilbert's arm excitedly.

"It's worth a hundred thousand dollars," she declared. "My father said so. Don't you take a cent less!"

Gilbert shrugged calm shoulders. Aware as he was that large transactions in real estate were negotiated wholly on a credit basis, he saw no reason for excitement. As long as all you got was credit it didn't seem to matter very much whether you got a lot of it or a little.

"All right," he said. He hesitated, the reed at his lips. " 'S funny. Feel 's if I'd seen him somewhere." He jerked his head in the direction of the door and gathered his brows in that frown which inevitably attended the effort of active cerebration. "Makes me think of somebody."

"It doesn't matter who he is," said Lollie. "Don't you let him have the factory for less than what it's

worth. A hundred thousand dollars at the very least!"

Already Gilbert had discovered, as to Lollie, the convenience of unarguing acquiescence. He nodded and returned contentedly to the bassoon. Its majestic voice thundered out through the empty building, and presently, as if born upon the backwash of that surging sound, the visitor returned. He stood in the doorway, polishing his eyeglasses.

"Where did you learn?" he demanded.

"Just sort of picked it up," said Gilbert. "Only been at it a couple of weeks."

The stranger wagged his head. "I thought so," he declared. "You're a natural, that's what you are! Yes, sir—you're a born bassoon, just like my brother was!"

His face darkened and he cast over his left shoulder a backward glance, singularly furtive and wary.

"If he'd had a place like this to practice in, Al would have been the outstanding bassoon of the century," he said, bitterness in voice and look.

"It's a good place," Gilbert agreed. "That's why I bought it. You got to have room for the bassoon."

"You bought it?" The caller spoke sharply, and Lollie's eye, encountering Gilbert's, became at once triumphant and admonishing. "I thought B. V. Plimsoll owned it."

"I bought it from him," said Gilbert. "Last week."

The dapper man's face was eloquent of displeasure.

"There's luck for you!" he said. "I came all the way up here in this heat just to buy this plant!" He paused, tilted his head. "You want to sell?"

Gilbert frowned. In spite of that unpleasant matter of taxes, the idea of selling did not yet attract him. Nobody had said anything about taxes; maybe there

wouldn't be any, and a natural, born bassoon ought to cling as long as possible to an utterly ideal place in which to practice. Besides, when you sold things you only got credit, and—

"I'd pay spot cash if the price was right."

Gilbert coughed. Plainly, here was a man unversed in the usages of big business.

"It's worth a hundred thousand dollars," he said, under the wordless exhortation of Lollie's intent gaze.

"I might pay eighty."

Thoughtfully, with wistfulness, Gilbert coughed. In association with that highly unbusinesslike suggestion of cash payment on the very spot, eighty thousand dollars found a beckoning charm. He had no immediate need for money but he felt sure that agreeable uses for it would suggest themselves. There was, too, that matter of taxes. He conceived a tired dislike for the word. He was tempted, but not to the point of disregarding Lollie's orders.

When people spoke to him in the fashion Lollie had employed it was always simpler to do what they told you to. If you didn't they argued about it until you did. It saved trouble to let them have their way.

"It's worth a hundred thousand," he said.

"Split the difference," urged the dapper man. "That's fair. Ninety—spot cash. What do you say?"

"It's worth a——"

"Take it, Gilbert," said Lollie, with decision. Gilbert was relieved. There had already been a lot of talk, he felt, about a mere matter of business. He signified his assent with an unhurried nod, but the buyer's face and manner had undergone a sudden change.

The rimless glasses gave passage, now, to a gaze of suspicion and concern. The voice that had been briskly

affable and persuasive became challenging and stern.

"Gilbert?" The name was echoed harshly. "Gilbert who?"

His head jerked, casting behind him the swift, wary glance of one who has cause to fear danger at his back. That movement, the altered voice, brought light to Gilbert's dim, groping memories.

"I thought I knew you," he said. "You're my Uncle Herbie, aren't you? I'm Gilbert."

Magnanimously, letting bygones be bygones, he proffered his right hand. He knew that Uncle Herbie had been guilty, in some obscure fashion, of behavior wholly unworthy of a brother-in-law and uncle, but it was less trouble to forget past grievances than to remember them, and he chose, as always, the pleasant line of least resistance. Uncle Herbie, however, recoiled before the amiable gesture.

"I thought you'd gone to live in India," he said, giving the speech the quality of accusation and reproach. "The paper said——"

"I pretty nearly went," said Gilbert. "I missed the boat."

Uncle Herbie removed and polished his glasses; with the same silk handkerchief he nervously ministered to a forehead that seemed suddenly to suffer from the heat. Once more he glanced behind him.

"You—you missed the boat?" he echoed. "Then you'll be going, just the same?"

Almost with decision Gilbert wagged his head. He felt quite certain that whatever happened he wasn't going to India. It was one of the very few things about which he had ever held a positive conviction.

"No," he declared. "I'm going to stay right here."

"You are, eh?" Uncle Herbie received the information with a singular absence of visible joy. He

drew a time-table from his pocket, unfolded it and, with a forefinger unsteadied as if by some strong emotion, traced an exploring line across its intricacies.

"I can get the twelve-fifty back," he said, as one who thinks aloud.

"But you're going to buy the factory, aren't you?" It was B. V. Plimsoll's daughter who spoke; not her father himself could have brought the conversation back to business with more firmness and immediacy.

"Factory?" The word seemed, for the moment, to bewilder Uncle Herbie. "No," he said, remembering. "That's off."

He pocketed the time-table and, straightening his shoulders, seemed to attempt the recovery of his earlier, assured self-confidence.

"I'm sorry I shan't be able to stop and see your mother," he informed Gilbert. "Tell her I——"

"She's not home," said Gilbert. Uncle Herbie seemed to find the statement of interest and moment. He stared.

"Where is she?"

"On the boat." Gilbert's hand moved in the general direction of the Atlantic. "She didn't miss it."

Uncle Herbie again displayed an attention slightly out of proportion to the news value of the remark. There was now in his attitude and manner less of the suggestion of urgency and haste. He regarded Gilbert narrowly.

"When's she coming back?" he demanded.

Gilbert shook his head. "She's going to India first, I guess." He explored a pocket and withdrew an envelope, as yet unopened. "Unless she's changed her mind since yesterday. Maybe I better see what this wireless says."

He tore the cover and unfolded the message. His

eye descended negligently to its purple typescript, an eye wholly unforewarned of the horror that lay in wait. At first, as the words leaped up at him from their ambush, they merely stunned and paralyzed. He stared at them, drugged by the sheer ghastliness of their announcement.

The blank despair of his stricken face drew Lollie swiftly to his side. Over his shoulder she read his telegram. She caught in her breath with a gasping sound.

"What is it?" Uncle Herbie's glance searched the two appalled faces.

"Married!" said Gilbert dazedly.

"To Cousin Arthur Timlow!" said Lollie. "On the boat! By the captain!"

Bruskly, without by-your-leave, Uncle Herbie snatched the message from Gilbert's unnerved hands. Through the shining glasses his eyes seemed to pounce down upon the words. Slowly he drew in a deep breath; his shoulders squared.

"Those shipboard marriages are perfectly legal, too," he said, as one who thinks aloud. He spoke with callous cheerfulness. "Let's get down to business. I'll give you ninety thousand for the plant—cash on the nail. Is it a deal?"

Gilbert moved his head vaguely. This was no time for light, shallow talk about selling factories. He sat in marrow-frozen, shocked amaze, staring forward at a prospect of enforced, escapeless association with a man who kissed hands, who—he coughed, a cough ominous of inward quease and shudder, and his filmed eye turned in quest of sympathy to Lollie.

But Lollie, too, seemed unaware of tragedy. Her gaze dwelt, with a singular brightness, upon Uncle Herbie. There was even the queer little flicker of the

dimple in her cheek that Gilbert had come to associate with strong secret mirth on Lollie's part.

She thought it was funny, did she? The iron twisted in Gilbert's soul. You let a girl go round with you, night after night; you gave her a chance to be shadowed by a regular detective; you even bought houses just to keep her heart from getting broken, and instead of standing by you when a ghastly disaster happened to you, the faithless woman only laughed and talked merrily about selling factories!

Somehow the discovery of Lollie's true nature seemed, at the moment, even harder to bear than the major sorrow of having a mother married to a hand-kisser. It hurt. It was like a toothache, only worse and deep down inside you.

She was shaking his shoulder, now, and talking fast about going down to the bank and signing the papers. For some reason she sounded excited about this dull, tame affair of selling a factory, excited and pleased. His sense of injury deepened, but his habit of avoiding argument brought him mechanically to his feet. He suffered himself to be urged past the door.

He was not even permitted the poor solace of traveling in the company of Mr. Noonan. Lollie's hand on his sleeve restrained him when he started toward the small sedan in which, coatless and uncollared, the detective slept at the steering wheel, his head sagging obliquely on its cushion of blue, nested chins.

"Sh-h! Don't wake him!" Lollie whispered. "We'll ride down in your uncle's taxi."

It wasn't worth arguing about, Gilbert decided. He obeyed the impelling hand that guided him out to the yellow cab waiting in the road. Submerged in gloom, he smoked a melancholy cigarette, paying no heed to the conversation between Lollie and Uncle Herbie

except to notice, bitterly, that it was keyed on both sides to ill-timed gaiety. Darkly, as he passed the signboard gates of Paradise, he surveyed the roof, visible above the intervening trees, of the house he had bought for Lollie's unworthy sake.

It would have served her absolutely right if he had let those Pittsburgh parties buy that house. Maybe he'd let them buy it anyway. He rejected the unkind thought, however. Even now, he discovered, he didn't exactly want to break Lollie's heart. Besides, the house would be a good place to play a bassoon, and he'd better keep it, as long as he was going to give up the piano works. There was, also, something comforting about owning property, even though you might have to bother with taxes and things. Yes. He'd keep the house, in spite of the way Lollie had acted.

He took no active part in the interview with Mr. McFetridge at the bank. He withdrew deeply into dark meditations, only vaguely aware that for the first time in their acquaintance Mr. McFetridge regarded him without manifest disapproval and that Uncle Herbie, for some mysterious reason, was astonished and impressed.

"You mean to tell me that B. V. Plimsoll's putting the purchase money right back into trust for Gilbert? Why, that means he makes him a present of the plant!"

"It does," said McFetridge. His eye, Gilbert observed, moved thoughtfully to Lollie. Uncle Herbie, too, surveyed her gravely.

"H'm." Slowly, as if he found himself in agreement with a pleasing thought, Uncle Herbie nodded. Detaching itself from Lollie his eye now dwelt upon his nephew, an eye possessive, approving, almost respectful. "H'm." Again, abruptly, he became the

brisk man of affairs. "Let's get down to business. I brought along a certified check, Mac." He slid a pale-green slip across the desk. "You can put the balance to my credit."

Incuriously Gilbert took part in the familiar rite of signing papers. After all Uncle Herbie's talk about hard cash there was a disappointing absence of actual money in the transaction, but even this did not greatly affect Gilbert. He had suspected all along that there would be a catch in this thing, somewhere. Inattentively he listened to Mr. McFetridge, addressing him in a voice quite unlike that in which, heretofore, it had been his custom to speak to Mrs. Dolliver's attendant son.

"We'll pay the purchase money note you gave Mr. Plimsoll and put the balance to your credit, if that's satisfactory."

With resignation Gilbert nodded. He might have known, right along, that this would turn out to be nothing but another affair of credit.

"And there's another note of yours here for collection," Mr. McFetridge continued. "A note for twenty-seven five in favor of the Paradise Heights Realty Corporation. Shall we pay that off for you too?"

Gilbert was touched by the friendliness of this suggestion. It was not his habit to speculate as to whether or not people liked him, but he had always felt that Mr. McFetridge was one of those who didn't. Evidently he had been wrong about this. Of course, as these things were managed between big business men, there was no inconvenience about paying off notes for people, but the gesture, all the same, was gracious.

"I'd be much obliged," he said gratefully. "It's mighty good of you."

Mr. McFetridge indicated, by the dismissing movement of his hand, that the favor wasn't worth mentioning. The intensity of Lollie's gaze drew Gilbert's glance in her direction.

"Why are you paying all that money to Mr. Greminger?" she demanded. Her voice was almost accusing, but her eyes were singularly wide and round and blue and there seemed to be no anger in them. Gilbert coughed appeasingly.

"For the house," he said. "I bought it the other day."

Lollie's indrawn breath made a funny little catching sound.

"What for?" The tone was still accusing, but there was even less anger than before in the wideness of the eyes. Gilbert moved his feet uneasily. He felt a certain disinclination to speak the truth, but his lifelong habit of avoiding, whenever possible, the mental effort of invention, had left him unready with evasions.

"Well, Mr. Greminger thought I better do it," he said. "Some Pittsburgh parties were going to buy it if I didn't and Mr. Greminger said it would break your heart to let 'em have it, so I just bought it, that's all."

Generously he heaped coals of fire.

"You can go there all you want to now."

There was a little pause. Again Lollie's breath made that funny little catching noise.

"You're just too marvelous!" she said. Gilbert was familiar with the phrase, but for once it seemed to mean just what it said. This was curious, too, because Lollie laughed while she was saying it, as if she didn't mean it at all.

"There just couldn't be anybody else in the world like you," she declared.

"Not many," said Uncle Herbie, unexpectedly. He addressed Mr. McFetridge. "Know what this boy is, Mac? He's a bassoon!"

Mr. McFetridge's eyebrows seemed to request elucidation of the tribute. Uncle Herbie wagged his head.

"Yes, sir—a natural, born bassoon, just like poor, old Al! Scarcest thing in the world, Mac! You could count all the real, top-notch bassoons there are on your ten fingers!"

Almost with reverence his gaze dwelt upon his nephew.

"No wonder you made such a hit with B. V. Plimsoll!" he said. A shadow clouded his look. "My own brother's boy—and I let B. V. Plimsoll beat me to him!"

McFetridge's ocular movement guided Uncle Herbie's eye to Lollie. The banker's countenance wore a look of strangely conflicting emotions, but caution was predominant among them. Admonished, Uncle Herbie made amends for the unseemly tone in which he had named the august author of her being.

"My hat's off to your father, and you can tell him I said so! He beat me to it, fair and square. My own nephew a natural born bassoon, and me never finding it out till after B. V. Plimsoll's spotted him and made him a present of that factory just to practice in! Your father's a great big man, Miss Plimsoll. I always did say he was the biggest toad in this puddle!"

Lollie received the tribute with that polite indulgence peculiar to great men's daughters.

"I'll tell him you said so."

She spoke absently, her eyes, still curiously rounder and bluer than usual, unwavering from Gilbert. With

singularly kindred glances Uncle Herbie and Mr. McFetridge regarded her, even the formidable flint of the banker's countenance somehow warmed and softened.

"My credit's good with you, isn't it, Mac?" said Uncle Herbie. Mr. McFetridge recovered his normal aspect.

"Up to ten thousand," he admitted. Uncle Herbie rose.

"I guess I can afford to buy these two children a lunch, then," he chuckled. "This is a big day. I've got to celebrate." He addressed Gilbert. "Know any place where we can get champagne that's fit to swallow?"

Morosely Gilbert nodded. He didn't particularly like champagne but it might, he felt, uplift and fortify his drooping spirits.

"Then lead me to it," said Uncle Herbie blithely, "and we'll pull off a regular wedding breakfast and drink to the"—he paused, as if to enhance by postponement the grateful savor of the words—"to the bride and groom!"

He laughed buoyantly and his hand fell fondly upon his nephew's desponding shoulder. Under this tactless reminder Gilbert coughed, the cough infallibly inspired by the thought of Mr. Arthur Timlow, a brief, dismal, gagging sound.

In quest of sympathy his unhappy eye turned to Lollie, but again she failed him. As merrily as Uncle Herbie she too laughed. She had also laughed, Gilbert remembered, when she'd put that chewing gum into his curls.

It was Mr. McFetridge whose face revealed a seemly attitude toward Uncle Herbie's lamentable breach of tact and taste. Gilbert's heart warmed to the banker; he hadn't looked for sympathetic under-

standing in the flinty countenance, and it was doubly comforting to find it there. Mr. McFetridge looked as shocked, almost, as Gilbert felt. His mouth hung open; his eyes were wide and blank and horror-stricken. Mutely he stared as Uncle Herbie, waving a gay farewell, urged Gilbert affably toward the door, a man, unmistakably, who saw nothing whatever to laugh at in such topics as wedding breakfasts and—again Gilbert coughed—and brides and grooms.

Glancing back wistfully as he was led away from this congenial company, Gilbert observed that Mr. McFetridge had lifted his telephone and, still wearing his agreeable aspect of dismay, was urgently rattling the hook of its receiver.

"Get me B. V. Plimsoll," Mr. McFetridge was saying, "and get him quick!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ON THE terrace, where the gray wall of the house built a narrow tent of shadow against the hostile sun of daylight-saving afternoon, Belden Plimsoll sought refuge and sympathy after the longest, busiest, hottest, unhappiest Monday of his life.

In her wicker chair beside the iced-tea table Albertine heard his appalling news with a baffling calm. Bare-armed, in her thin wisp of a dress, she remained as enviably cool as the mist-frosted glass from which she drank, and her smile, as she listened, became softer and more placid, for all the world as if she was pleased to hear that her daughter had ominously vanished, vanished in the company of Gilbert Dolliver and his unspeakable uncle, vanished after the crazy freak of accident that had put fifty thousand dollars of Plimsoll's money into Gilbert's pocket and forty-odd thousand more into trust for his behoof, vanished with sinister allusions to midday champagne and wedding breakfasts and brides and grooms!

It didn't seem to matter to Albertine that a long afternoon of frantically efficient seekings on B. V. Plimsoll's part, had failed to find a trace of the three fugitives.

"I thought you'd make her do it," Albertine said. "I've thought all along that you'd——"

"I was waiting for that! I knew you'd blame it all on me!" Plimsoll spoke with bitter heat. "You know that I've done more than any other man on earth could have done to keep this horrible thing from

happening, but you sit there and tell me that I made it happen!"

"I shouldn't dream of blaming you for anything," said Albertine affectionately. "I know you meant it all for the best. Fathers always mean well, I suppose. If it turns out that they've really run away and got married——"

"That's one thing that won't happen!" He broke in confidently. "They may have tried it, but that's as far as they'll get."

Albertine's brows arched inquiringly. He laughed shortly, hugging his triumph.

"I've got a man following them," he said. "I've had a first-class detective trailing Gilbert ever since——"

He paused. Instead of admiring him Teenie's gaze clouded with unmistakable reproach.

"A detective! Shadowing your own daughter! Oh, Belden! How could you?"

"He's not shadowing Lollie. He's trailing Gilbert."

"It's the same thing. They're always together. The man can't help guessing——"

"I don't like the idea any better than you do," said Plimsoll, "but I'd go a lot farther than that sooner than run any risk of Lollie's wrecking her life by"—he paused, not quite able to put the unthinkable into words. "Noonan's a good man and he's got a daughter of his own. I'm glad I put him on this job. It's the only thing that keeps me from going crazy with worry, right now. I know that Noonan won't let anything happen, if he has to pull a gun to stop it."

Albertine regarded him with grave attention. Her eyes continued to suggest reproach, but he fancied, absurdly, that her mouth was resisting a desire to

smile, as if she found something funny in what he had said.

Before, however, he found words in which to challenge that unseemly mirth, heels clicked on the flagstone floor of the library, gay heels in a tempo that was peculiarly and unmistakably Lollie's.

He was on his feet when she came to the doorway; he had stopped breathing; through his fears he felt the old lift and swell of heart at the sight of her, the old thrill of authorship and of possession. This was the real Lollie, the very Lollie of the photographs, glowing, vivid, affectionately dutiful. She was visibly happy; more visibly she was excited. Her father's hand tightened on the chair by which he supported himself against a curious weakness of knee.

"Where—where've you been?"

The question asked itself. He hadn't meant to speak first. He didn't want to know.

"Celebrating." Lollie's laugh bubbled up. "Wedding breakfast. Champagne and everything."

Plimsoll swayed a little. His eyes blinked and he shook his head vaguely as a boxer does after a jarring blow. Albertine's indrawn breath made a queer sound; even through his mental blur her husband found something wrong with that swift gasp. There was no horror in it.

"Whose—whose wedding?" Again, mechanically, his lips spoke a question he didn't want Lollie to answer. Her eyes met his briefly, widening a little; again, creamily, deep in her throat, she laughed.

"Hold tight, father. This is going to hit you hard. And mother, too." Another silver bubble seemed to burst. "Gilbert's mother's married to Cousin Arthur. The captain did it. They're going to London on their honeymoon!"

There was a singularly still silence. Slowly, profoundly, Belden Plimsoll's breath descended into unlocked lungs. Slowly the mists lifted from his mind; it was possible, now, to unclasp his fingers from their desperate clutch upon the back of the chair. He was content to listen to the rapid fire of question and answer between his wife and daughter. In the vast gladness of reprieve, he was actually pleased that Pansy had married Arthur Timlow, so pleased that he was able to dismiss a disturbing thought upon the costs of London honeymoons and the pocket from which those costs would of necessity be discharged. He could even forgive Arch McFetridge for the stupid misunderstanding that had given Belden Plimsoll the blackest half day of his life.

Lollie and Albertine were talking, now, about Uncle Herbie and his part in the day's succession of excitements. Plimsoll's attention came suddenly to their chatter.

"It was the *weirdest* thing," Lollie declared. "Uncle Herbie was crazy to buy the factory, at first, and then, the minute he found out who Gilbert was, he changed his mind. He acted—well, he acted as if he were scared to death. He was going to get the noon train and hurry right straight back to New York. And then Gilbert just happened to remember that he had a wireless from his mother that he hadn't opened yet, and he opened it and—well, you just ought to have seen what a difference it made in Uncle Herbie! He—he just sort of *glowed!* And he turned right around again and simply couldn't wait to buy the factory from Gilbert." She paused and her eye gravely conferred with Albertine's. "Do you suppose he was afraid that Gilbert's mother might——"

"She almost did," said Albertine. Again her hus-

band was baffled by the mysterious hardening of her soft gentleness. When Teenie spoke of Pansy Dolliver she got hard as nails; there wasn't a sign of charity or pity in her. "If he hadn't run away just when he did she'd certainly have caught him." Her face clouded; compassion came into it. "Poor Arthur!"

She sent a look of grave reproach at her husband.

"Don't be too sorry for him," said Lollie. "I just bet you he'll get along with her. And he's got a perfectly gorgeous position. Gilbert says he had the drawing room on the train and was just feeding money to the birds. I think it's perfectly splendid for them both, and of course it's a wonderful thing for Gilbert, too. His mother won't bother him so much, now that she's got Cousin Arthur to manage."

She sobered to rapt thoughtfulness.

"Honestly, I think Mr. Greminger must be right when he claims that things couldn't just happen the way they do. I think they're meant—I mean I do, really."

Carefully Belden Plimsoll avoided his wife's eye. Teenie, he knew, would read into Lollie's innocent speech a meaning altogether unwarranted. Teenie would always hold him responsible for this absolutely unforeseeable, unpreventable accident to her Cousin Arthur.

"It couldn't be just a string of perfectly wild coincidences," Lollie was saying. "It just couldn't be!"

"How do you mean?" He didn't want to know what she meant, but it seemed impossible not to ask the question.

"Oh, everything." She moved her hand includingly. "For instance, that day you fell off your horse—if I hadn't just happened to wake up and hear you raving about Gilbert I don't believe it would ever

have occurred to me to call him up and get him to take me to Bishy Fanshawe's dance. I thought he was perfectly awful till I heard you talking about him, and then somehow you made me think he might be kind of interesting and so I called him up."

"I see." Plimsoll permitted himself a faintly embittered tone, but its irony escaped his daughter's ear.

"But that wasn't the weirdest thing. That very day Gilbert had decided to leave Lakeport. He just couldn't stand things any longer. He was actually on his way to the station when he happened to notice that a detective was shadowing him."

Slight, convulsive movements on the part of both her parents failed to register upon her notice.

"A detective?" Plimsoll spoke with a faintly audible creak. "What's Gilbert been doing to get the police after him?"

"It isn't that kind of a detective. It's a private one. And that's why Gilbert didn't go to New York. He just had to stay here and find out why he was being shadowed, because he hadn't done anything that he could think of to make anybody hire a detective to watch him. Honestly, father, don't you think Mr. Greminger has the right idea? He says——"

"Has—has Gilbert found out who's having him watched?"

Plimsoll risked a momentary glance at Albertine. To his relief he saw that the expression he chiefly dreaded had not yet made its appearance in her face—the expression that would assert, in the face of all reason and justice, that Belden Plimsoll had bungled things, as usual, and that his wife had known, all along, that he would do so. Albertine was smiling placidly, as if she was pleasantly, approvingly amused.

"Not yet," Lollie admitted, "but I guess we will,

pretty soon. We're getting awfully well acquainted with the detective because ever since Gilbert's old car gave out the detective's been driving us around in his, and so we get lots of chance to pump him." She glowed again. "I don't believe there's anybody else in the world who'd have such a perfectly gorgeous idea as that! Using a detective who's shadowing him as a free chauffeur! Gilbert's just too marvelous!" Her face clouded a little. "But I suppose, now that he's got a new car of his own, we shan't be riding around with Mr. Noonan any more."

Plimsoll, wincing, found an acid comfort in the implication. After all, a fool and his money——

"Bought himself a car already, has he?"

"Oh, no." Lollie beamed again. "Uncle Herbie bought it for him. You just ought to see it! One of those new snakey ones with a front-wheel drive."

She extended her hand, palm down, to indicate with singular vividness the belly-to-earth snakiness of the new car. Plimsoll winced again. He knew what such cars cost.

"Quite"—he swallowed—"quite a present for Herb Dolliver to give away," he said. "He must have changed. He used to be pretty close-fisted."

"He is yet," said Lollie. "He made a frightful fuss with the waiter about the price they charged for champagne. But he's so crazy about Gilbert that I guess he didn't care what the car cost. And besides, after what you'd done for Gilbert, he said——"

"I?" Plimsoll's shoulders jerked. "What have I done for——?"

His daughter's eyes adored him.

"I suppose you don't think it was anything—giving Gilbert a whole piano factory for absolutely nothing! You just ought to have seen Uncle Herbie's face when

Mr. McFetridge told him how you'd arranged to give Gilbert back all the money he was supposed to pay you! That's really why he bought Gilbert the car—he said he guessed it was the least he could do, if you were giving away factories like that. So it's really because of you that Gilbert's got the car. I think you're just *too* noble, father!"

There was no joy for Belden Plimsoll, for once, in the glow of a gaze of perfect daughterliness, but with his back to the wall, looking disaster between the eyes, his mind moved Napoleonically, with quickened pace and surer certainty. In the face of utter rout he became more adequate, more resolute, more brilliant than ever. There was hardly a perceptible pause between Lollie's tribute and his answer, and yet, in that minute lapse of time, he searched, found, considered and decided.

"Well," he said genially, "you'll probably change your mind about me when you hear what I've got to tell you." He even managed a creditable chuckle of benignity. "I've been thinking over that scheme of yours about going to New York, and I've decided to let you do it. You can go as soon as you like. There! What do you say to that?"

He heard, faintly, Albertine's little gasp of astonishment but he held his eyes resolutely upon his daughter's face. His heart sank. There was no rejoicing in Lollie's look. Her countenance, from blank bewilderment, changed swiftly to intense, displeased thoughtfulness and swiftly back to blankness, a blankness somehow not quite convincing.

"New York?" Her voice was puzzled. "Whatever are you talking about? What scheme?"

He was familiar with this manœuvre. Albertine had frequently employed it. In ordinary circumstances

it would have moved him to a justified display of anger, but he was on his guard now. He held his righteous indignation vigilantly in check. He even grinned.

"Of course you don't know," he jested. "Of course you've forgotten all about your idea of living in New York and studying tap-dancing, haven't you?" He chuckled. "You never wanted to go there, did you? Never dreamed of wanting to get away from this little town and——"

"Lakeport?" Lollie's eyes were suddenly warm and soft and swimming. "Leave Lakeport? Me?" Her voice sank suddenly. As if only for her own ear it quoted lovingly. "Where skies are bluer, grass is greener—where life's worth living twice!"

Never had Belden Plimsoll heard the noble words more fittingly recited. Their beauty and their truth came home to him as never before. And instead of softening his heart, they steeled it. If Lollie could speak in that voice of Lakeport the time had come for last resorts. Nothing was left, now, but the inexorable putting down of a father's wise, loving, unrelenting foot.

He drew breath to put it down.

"Now look here, Lollie——"

It was the preface, always, to unchallengeable edict; the voice in which it was spoken was a voice from a throne, above all question and dispute. Once judgment had been uttered, in this voice and after this preamble, there could be no appeal. But, hesitating for added solemnity, Belden Plimsoll found himself abruptly in competition with a voice even mightier and more compelling, the deep-throated booming bay, from the driveway, of Gilbert Dolliver's bassoon.

The summons had upon Lollie an effect more

instantly and joyously responsive than on the earlier occasions when it had intruded upon her conferences with her father. She moved with blithe swiftness to the library door. The bassoon fell silent as she reached it, and Albertine's voice, curiously placid, called to her.

"Have a good time, Lollums."

Lollie turned, her face for once failing to resent the forbidden corruption of her name.

"Don't worry," she said. "I will. We're going to try out the new car—drive over to Sawneytown for dinner."

The bassoon, now augustly petulant, renewed its invitation. She danced away. Reluctantly, almost timidly, Belden Plimsoll's eye swiveled to consult Albertine's.

He was prepared for criticism, the unjust and captious criticism of short-sightedness and ignorance; in the act of turning he had braced himself to meet groundless complaint with patience and with reason. But Albertine was surveying him with a placidity even softer and kindlier than usual. Irrelevantly he thought that when Teenie stopped worrying she was just as pretty as ever—prettier, in fact. There was something in her face now that hadn't been there when she was eighteen and the prettiest girl in the whole Saugahatch Basin, celebrated then as now for the blueness of its skies, the purity of its Artesian waters, the fairness of its women.

She hadn't begun as yet, he guessed, to realize how serious the situation was. It was just like Teenie, he thought, to stop worrying precisely when there was something real to worry about. But, as he watched her, her smile deepened; it became an unworthy smile, a smile altogether wifely. Not unkindly but without seemly respect, it frankly laughed at him.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "You think it's all my fault. You think I've handled this thing all wrong."

"But I don't!" Her eyes widened, achieving now a curious resemblance to her daughter's. "I think you've managed just splendidly!"

He saw that she meant it, and there was a heartening comfort in the discovery.

"Nobody could have foreseen a string of perfectly crazy coincidences like this," he said. "Everything that possibly could break the wrong way has done it, but I'll manage, just the same. You'll see."

"I'm sure you will, dear." She hesitated. "Are you going to make her go to New York, Belden, whether she wants to or not?"

He considered. "I'm going to get her away from here, anyway," he decided. "That's the main thing. It doesn't matter so much where she goes. Maybe it would be better to take her abroad. We could run over to Europe for a while, and give her a chance to get over this."

He paused. Albertine was regarding him queerly, so queerly that he felt again the disquieting suspicion that she was laughing at him. But she reassured him. As if his suggestion impressed her as the proposal of pure inspiration, she moved her head, reverently admiring, in a little quarter-circle of approval and applause.

"You're just too marvelous!"

He laughed indulgently. She had worded it a little extravagantly, perhaps, but the error, if any, was in the right direction.

"That's the way to talk!" he said. "You just leave everything to me and it'll all turn out all right."

"I know it." A queer dreamy quality came into

her eyes. "I like him ever so much," she said. "He—he's so—so sort of restful."

"Who is?" Plimsoll stared.

"Why, Gilbert, of course!"

She rose, touched his cheek gently with the back of a singularly soft hand, and moved, still dreamily, toward the doorway. She had vanished before her husband found his voice.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

NEW YORK?" Gilbert, his attention momentarily detaching itself from the absorbing smoothness of the new car, echoed the two words with vague disfavor. "What do you want to go *there* for? Just when"—he paused, coughed—"just when things are breaking pretty around here and everything?"

"I don't want to go, Unconscious!" Lollie spoke with heat. "It's my father."

Gilbert frowned. He had begun to harbor toward B. V. Plimsoll a certain forgiving tolerance. It was clear, from what Mr. McFetridge and Uncle Herbie said, that Lollie's father had behaved generously in the matter of the piano factory. Gilbert, in view of this, was willing to forget Mr. Plimsoll's complicity in the pilgrimage to India. Now, it appeared, he would have to change his mind again, a process that was always unpleasantly disturbing.

"Why does he want you to go to New York?"

Lollie hesitated. Her silence pulled his glance toward her. For some reason there was rather more color in her face than usual and the effect, Gilbert decided, was pleasing.

"He—well, he just does, that's all. You know what parents are, I guess."

Gilbert coughed gloomily.

"Yeh." He meditated. "But you don't have to do it. You're always telling me a person doesn't have to do things just because their parents tell them to."

Lollie made an impatient little sound. "That's

absolutely different! Of course I don't have to do every single thing, no matter how poisonous it is, the way you did, but he can make me do this, and I just know he's going to do it, too. Or else he'll do something just as tiresome, like taking me abroad!"

Gilbert considered the matter deliberately. For some reason it displeased him.

"I knew all the time you were just handing me a lot of apple butter about not minding your parents," he said. "I knew it was all hooey about not having to mind your father."

"Well, you'll have a chance to see how you like it when your new father gets home!" said Lollie spitefully.

By narrow inches the new car avoided the roadside ditch. Before Gilbert there opened a future of pure ghastliness. In the bewildering excitements of the day the relationship in which he must henceforward stand toward Mr. Arthur Timlow had not come clearly before his attention. He saw it now with horror and despair. He saw it so clearly and with such panic-stricken repugnance that his mind was moved of its own accord to activity alien to its habit.

For the first time in his life Gilbert thought, thought intensely and vehemently, in the very fashion of a B. V. Plimsoll. And upon him, as reward, there descended a sudden, blinding light of inspiration.

"Look, Lollie! We got to do something. Both of us. We just got to!"

"Go on from there," said Lollie. "What do we do?"

"We"—he coughed—"the Perfessor says——"

He fell silent, appalled by the desperateness of the device.

"Well?" Lollie prompted.

"He says you don't have to mind anybody after you—after you get married."

"Do you mean *us?*" Lollie's voice sounded so unbelieving that Gilbert was moved to a defensive tone.

"Well, we're both up against the same kind of trouble, and——"

"Do you—do you *want* to?"

"Well, I guess I'd do pretty nearly anything sooner than——" he paused. Something, it seemed, was wrong with this answer. "I guess I could stand——" this, also, was wrong. The correct response came suddenly to him.

"Yeh," he said.

He was pleasantly astonished to discover the accuracy with which he had expressed his feelings. His foot increased its pressure and the speedometer registered a soothing sixty, but the pace seemed less than adequate to the moment and Gilbert was constrained to apologize for it.

"Got to go kind of slow for the first five hundred miles. You can't let a new car out till it's broken in."

"It won't work," said Lollie. It was clear to Gilbert that she referred to the previous topic rather than to the car.

"Why won't it?"

"My father." She shook her head. "He'd never let me."

"None of his funeral," Gilbert pointed out.

"Try and make him see that!" Lollie sighed. "He's just absolutely got to general-manage everything. He's got a perfectly incurable Jehova complex. He wouldn't even listen—he'd just call out the troops and start me off to Siberia!"

"But he couldn't. You wouldn't have to mind him." Gilbert groped for the letter of the Perfessor's assur-

ance. "When you get married you have to forsake your father and—and cleaf absolutely unto your—your——"

He found it impossible to utter the next word, but the word itself, nevertheless, acquired a surprising appeal. There was a beautiful usualness about being a husband, a regularity even more agreeably commonplace than that of the property owner.

"Oh, you mean you want to *elope!*" Lollie put upon the final word a stress of strong disfavor. "As if I'd do anything so poisonously old-fashioned!"

"Huh?" Bewilderment was in Gilbert's cough.

"People used to elope back in those sickening nineties," said Lollie, "when a girl had to get her father's permission to breathe! I hope I've got too much self-respect to do anything so positively mid-Victorian!"

Gloomily Gilbert accepted the decision as finally disposing of the marriage question. It was too bad. Getting married would certainly have settled, with beautiful completeness, any question as to his relations with Mr. Timlow, and the idea of being a husband had already fastened strongly upon his fancy.

"No," said Lollie. "I'm going to be married decently. I'm going to have St. Bartholomew's and the bishop and eight bridesmaids and the little Fanshawe twins for flower girls and——"

Pure mechanics depressed Gilbert's revolted foot. The speedometer quivered up to sixty-five; a church . . . flower girls . . . sixty-seven, sixty-nine . . . a—a bishop . . . seventy seemed slow as a pace of escape from these unthinkable suggestions, and seventy, at present, was all the car would do.

It was doing it nobly, however, when harsh honkings from the rear interrupted Lollie's description of the bridesmaids' dresses. A motor cycle swooped past,

a blue-sleeved arm waved augustly at the roadside.

"What seems to be wrong?" An aggrieved voice feigned anxious interest. "Is seventy all you can squeeze out of her? Now ain't that just tooo-oo ba-a-a-d! It's lucky I come along. I'll just show you the way to Judge Eckstrom's shop, buddy. He knows just what's good for your kind of engine trouble!"

Gilbert knew all about Judge Eckstrom. Sawney County jail yawned.

"Look——" he fumbled uselessly for argument.

"Oh, have a heart, officer!" Lollie's voice slid creamily past him. "You don't want to ruin a perfectly good wedding, do you? We have to drive fast or the license office will be shut before we get there."

"Yeah? I heard that one a coupla times, too." The voice, perceptibly abating in harshness, was still skeptical.

"Honestly." A slight wobble introduced itself into Lollie's soprano. "Please don't hold us up—we can hardly get there now!"

"I'll tell you what I'll do. You got to go to the court house anyway. If you're on the up-and-up with this line, you go in with me and get your license; if you're just handing me the old applesauce, you go across the hall and see Judge Eckstrom. And you don't need to hurry. You're in the sticks, and daylight saving's out, see? How about it?"

"Oh, *thanks!*"

"Say, you might be on the level with it, at that!" The official eye relented a little, dwelt upon her, thawed, swung to Gilbert and became jocularly severe. "And if that's so, what's the idea of creeping along holding up traffic the way you was doing, buddy?"

"New car," said Gilbert, apologetically. "I didn't want to let her out much just yet."

The policeman leaned to inspect the mileage. He whistled.

"You win," he said. "Come on."

He sped on before them. Gilbert followed, his mind suffering from a mild confusion.

"I thought you said you wouldn't——" he began.

"I had to do something, didn't I?" Lollie interrupted. "You know what Judge Eckstrom is! If I hadn't thought of that line about the license you'd have gone to jail! Wasn't it lucky that we happened to be talking about it just before that policeman happened to——"

She stopped. Gilbert heard the catching sound as she drew a quick, awestricken breath.

"Happened! Another perfectly weird coincidence, unless—unless it's all *meant!* I wonder if Mr. Greminger could be right, Gilbert? Do you suppose——?"

"I always kind of liked that religion we tried that had fate mixed up in it," said Gilbert. "It's a kind of comfortable idea. If everything's all settled for you anyway you don't need to bother about deciding things and trying to look ahead and all that. All you have to do is lean back and let things happen. I guess I liked that religion the best of all we ever tried." He paused. "Wish I could remember the name of it."

Lollie was thoughtfully silent for a space. Suddenly she straightened.

"I know! We'll just try it! We'll leave it to fate, and find out whether we're meant to—to do anything! We've got to get the license anyway or else go to jail. So we'll get it and then see what happens. We won't try to decide it ourselves."

"Yeh!" Gilbert assented with the nearest approach to enthusiasm of which he was capable. "You're not so dumb, Lollie. I always said you weren't."

He drew in to the curb before the Sawneytown Court House and, deeply stirred, accommodated his pace to the swiftness of Lollie's; for once, somehow, he didn't mind hurrying a little. The policeman, pausing at the doorway of the License Bureau, ushered Lollie gallantly past and found opportunity for a profanely emphatic whisper to Gilbert on the topic of luck.

Coughing, by way of answer, Gilbert felt vaguely that there was something in what the fellow said. It certainly did look as if something—Luck or Fate or whatever you wanted to call it—would manage your affairs for you if you let it. So far today it had unquestionably managed Gilbert's, anyway, and managed them in a fashion to inspire complete confidence in its good-will and competence.

Affairs of greater moment were still to be left, at Lollie's clever suggestion, to the decision and control of this same convenient arbiter. Gilbert felt a very strong hope that Fate would rise to this emergency, but he was aware of a desire, altogether foreign to his habit, to do something himself toward insuring a satisfactory event.

While, therefore, he leaned upon a wooden shelf before a wicket and answered the impertinences of a tired-looking clerk, he struck thrice, with the knuckles of his right hand, on the under surface of the disaster-averting wood.

He felt, as he followed Lollie away from the now wistful policeman, that whatever happened, he, at least, had done his part.

He did not notice the approach, from the direction of Lakeport, of an ordinary little sedan, arriving at the court house a few seconds after the new car had moved away. He had forgotten all about being shadowed; he omitted to cast behind him the routine glance

of the habituated fugitive. He failed, therefore, to observe the encounter, on the curb, of a warm, shirt-sleeved, blue-jawed gentleman and a traffic officer who stood gazing, rather unprofessionally, after a blithely departing brand-new car.

At the Buttright Inn, a few brief miles beyond the village, Lollie decided that it was too early and too hot to eat. She seemed a little queer, Gilbert thought; she was unusually still, anyway, and whenever he glanced at her he had a feeling that she was afraid. This, vaguely, he could understand; he was frightened, kind of, himself.

He chose, by instinct, a road that circled widely back toward Egandale, and Lollie didn't object. She didn't say anything at all; she just sat there, holding the license and looking—well, looking scared. He discovered that he didn't like this; he didn't want Lollie to be scared.

"Nothing to be afraid of," he said. "Bound to come out all right."

"I know." She sounded queerly breathless, though.

"You're all right," he insisted. "I wouldn't let anything happen to you. I guess you know that. You don't ever need to be afraid of anything as long as I'm around, Lollie."

"I know," she said again. "I'm silly. Only, thinking about fate that way kind of scares me. If there is such a thing it just has to be so awfully big, and we're so tiny and—and helpless!"

Gilbert's right hand astonished him by leaving the wheel and closing about Lollie's left.

"I guess it doesn't matter how big it is," he said, "as long as it's on our side."

"If it is!" She sounded more afraid than ever. "If it just *is!*"

"It is, all right. Just look how everything's happened right along—look at the way I got out of going to India and look at how we found the house and the piano works and look at how Uncle Herbie showed up just in time and everything! Look at that cop, just now! Why, it couldn't just happen, Lollie—not all that. No, sir—it's *meant!*"

He enlarged upon the theory. They came presently to Egandale and the piano works, where Mr. Fenstermacher, dinner pail in hand, was in the act of opening the office door. He made them welcome, and the debate continuing while he assembled his bassoon, expressed himself strongly on the side of destiny.

"If a man doesn't learn anything else out of the funeraltor game," he declared, "he can't help learning that you can't buck fate. Why, that's right at the bottom of funeraltor business, that is. If we didn't have to take what's coming to us and take it when it comes, there wouldn't *be* any funeraltor game! Why, I could tell you any number of cases where——"

He stooped to recover the license which had slipped from Lollie's unnerved fingers. As he straightened, holding it, accident or destiny elected to bring before him the countenance of Mr. Thomas Noonan, a countenance warmly moist but sternly, grimly blue-jowled and forbidding.

"That'll be all," said Mr. Noonan with rasping finality. "You can't put anything like this across! Not a chance! I'm stopping this wedding bell stuff right here."

Gilbert could only stare. So this was the way fate acted, was it? So it had only been kidding him along, all this time, only playing with him, cat-and-mouse, just to pull a mean, low-down trick like this at the last of it?

"Oh, you're going to stop it, are you?"

Lollie's voice wasn't a bit like cream. It was more like a knife, Gilbert thought, a thin, sharp, curiously dangerous knife. She had moved, too, so that she stood close to him, a little nearer to Noonan.

"I'd just like to see you stop me from doing anything I choose to," she said. "Mr. Fenstermacher, you go right straight ahead and marry us!"

Mr. Fenstermacher was heard to say something incoherent about a license.

"You've got it in your hand," Lollie told him. "Never mind what this man says. You just marry us, that's all!"

Her hand slipped through the bend of Gilbert's elbow. Its gentle pressure turned him slightly so that he stood facing Mr. Fenstermacher. He began to think more kindly of fate. Maybe, after all——

"Nothing stirring," said Noonan. "Not if I have to hold a rod on you!"

A flat blue gun appeared somehow in his big hand and pointed at the approximate middle of Mr. Fenstermacher. It was to Lollie, however, that he addressed himself.

"I'm doing this for your own sake, Miss Plimsoll. I told your father I'd pull my rod before I'd let you make a crazy play like this. I got a daughter of my own and I'd thank anybody to do the same thing for her if she ever tried to muss up her whole life the way you want to! You think it over and you won't want to do it! Just think what it'd mean."

"I've thought," said Lollie briefly, "and I'm going to do it."

"A bassoon bug!" urged Mr. Noonan earnestly. "You want to spend the rest of your life listening to that parlor foghorn?"

"Yes," said Lollie.

"And the bassoon ain't the only thing he's goofy about, either!" Noonan's voice rose. "How you going to like it when he gets another one of them notions about being some heathen idol, huh? How you going to like being married to somebody that thinks he's a baby Buddha or——"

Fate, at this point, received a little collaboration on the part of Gilbert. There was a sharp smacking sound, followed by the booming thump of Mr. Noonan's solid weight against the partition and the floor, the clatter of the gun at Gilbert's feet. In a sitting posture, his back against the partition, Mr. Noonan blinked with pained and puzzled surprise and gingerly cradled in a palm that point of a blue jaw technically denominated the button.

Without haste Gilbert recovered the gun. He turned to the pop-eyed Mr. Fenstermacher.

"That's that," he announced. "You can go right ahead now."

"You got to have a witness," said Mr. Fenstermacher feebly. Gilbert scowled. His eye returned thoughtfully to the recumbent Noonan; he coughed cheerfully. Using the blue gun as a pointer, he spoke.

"We got one," he said. "Right there. You can go ahead."

Mr. Fenstermacher, having withdrawn from his hip pocket a thin booklet, opened it ceremoniously and cleared his throat.

"I told you it'd come out all right."

Lollie made only a queer little wordless murmur, but Gilbert interpreted it as agreement and returned placidly to the comfortable silence of his habit. Dimly, however, an association of ideas perplexed him: somewhere, long ago, something had happened to him that

had made him feel almost exactly as he felt now. Suddenly, as the car approached the summit of a long, familiar slope, light came to him.

"I know what it feels like," he said.

"What?" asked Lollie.

"It makes me feel just the way I did the first time I got my hair cut!" said Gilbert.

And by force of habit, with Lollie's small, delighted laughter in his ears, he turned the new car blithely in between the illumined signs that entreated him with lyric, needless urgency, not to pass by Paradise.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THE mild October sun fell agreeably upon Belden Plimsoll. Even more pleasantly, the words of Uncle Herbie Dolliver fell upon his ear. He was almost glad, now, that his regular Saturday afternoon call upon his son-in-law and daughter had not found them at home. If they'd been here it wouldn't have been possible to hear again the frank confession of Uncle Herbie's opinions concerning Belden Plimsoll's signal success in the father business.

These opinions had been expressed to Plimsoll on a number of earlier occasions, but they were the kind of opinions that could stand a great deal of repetition.

"The neatest job of match-making that's ever been pulled off," said Uncle Herbie. "The more I think it over the slicker it looks. The way you"—he glanced over his shoulder—"the way you got Pansy out of the picture, so she couldn't interfere! That beautiful scheme of sending Art Timlow along! My hat's certainly off to you, B. V. You're mighty near as smart as you thi—as people think you are!"

Plimsoll received the tribute with the graciousness of one to whom praise is a familiar, routine affair.

"And then that piano factory!" Uncle Herbie's voice warmed. "The way you framed that up so that Gilbert would think he'd cleaned up a lot of money and feel perfectly able to get married! Why, Machiavelli would be proud of that one!"

Belden Plimsoll's look and gesture indicated that, however Machiavelli might have felt, the president

of the Intercontinental Adding Machine Company regarded these little matters as all in his day's work.

"And most of all," said Uncle Herbie, "the way you managed to make both those youngsters believe you were dead set against the match! That was just plain genius, B. V. If either of 'em had suspected that you were in favor of it, I doubt if even you could have pulled it off!"

"Psychology, that's all." Plimsoll made another disclaiming gesture.

"But the thing that gets me is your having the genius to pick out Gilbert. I don't believe there's another man in the world that would have done that. Why, he's my nephew and all that, but if I had a daughter and he'd come hanging around her, I'd have telephoned for the dog catcher, B. V. But you—how did you figure it out, anyway? How'd you ever come to see that he'd make just exactly the right man for a girl like Lollie?"

Plimsoll cleared his throat. For a moment the question troubled him, but only for a moment.

"It's simple enough, Herb. I've always made it my business to know my daughter better than anybody else. That's the real secret of success in—in this father business. You have to be—uh—pals with 'em. You have to know just what they think, just how they look at things. Lollie and I've always been just like that!" He lifted his hand, closed its fingers tightly.

"Yes, but——"

"And knowing her that way I couldn't help seeing that she'd never be happy with—with a go-getter. She wouldn't need one, you see. I've done all the go-getting that's necessary, and she'd grown up watching me do it. She naturally wouldn't find anything very new or exciting about a man who was all wrapped up

in a business. She'd want somebody whose talents ran the other way, if you know what I mean—somebody who specialized in enjoying life. And you don't see many like that around this country, Herb."

"What? No loafers?" Uncle Herbie challenged the statement. "Why——"

"I don't mean loafers or wasters or whoopee-makers," said Plimsoll. "I'm not talking about the youngsters who work at having a good time just the way their grandfathers used to work at selling groceries and building railroads. That's just making a business out of leisure, see? I wanted Lollie to marry a man who could sit still without being tied—a man who'd be perfectly happy being where he was, having what he had, a—well, a gentleman of leisure, if you see what I mean—the real thing, not the imitation. And that's what Gilbert is, when you get right down to it, and that's why I——" he hesitated. The words seemed slightly difficult of utterance, but he forced them. "That's why I picked him out for Lollie."

He distinctly remembered, now, having said all this somewhere before. Indeed he could even remember hearing Lollie telling him, gratefully, that he had made her realize, for the first time, just what Gilbert was and just how she felt about him.

"Why I picked him out," he repeated, with conviction, "and why I saw to it that she picked him out too."

"He *is* a—well, I guess you've got it right," said Uncle Herbie. "I guess he comes about as close to being a gentleman as——"

"Look at the way he treated his mother," Plimsoll cut in. "And ask yourself how anybody who wasn't just a born, incurable gentleman would have treated Pansy!"

Again, as if compelled by habit, Uncle Herbie cast

behind him the wary glance of the hunted and fugitive. Plimsoll chuckled.

"Quit worrying, Herb. You're safe. She won't come back. Art Timlow's turned out to be a whale of a London manager. I always knew he would. I knew that front of his would knock the British for a—for a row of ash cans. And Pansy won't leave England till she gets the King and Queen and Prince of Wales to join that new Swedenborgian mission she's running. You're safe. And you were always safe, Herb. There was never any sense in letting her run you out of Lakeport. It's against the law for a deceased brother's widow to——"

"Not in this state, it isn't!" declared Uncle Herbie positively. "I looked it up!"

Plimsoll, still chuckling, rose to go.

"And that's another reason why my hat's off to you, B. V.," said Uncle Herbie. "You framed up that match, too." He wagged his head. "I always did say you were the biggest toad in this puddle!"

The tribute warm upon his ear, Plimsoll departed. In the hallway he encountered Zenia, and a vague shadow slightly overcast his mood. Toward Miss Lollums' father Zenia bore herself with tolerance, but her mustang eye continued to behold him, Plimsoll felt, as only a little man who acted kind of biggy and who said his name was Simpsons.

The shadow was deepened by the discovery in the driveway of the small sedan of Mr. Thomas Noonan, beside whom sat a shock-headed, solemn infant stickily preoccupied with a large, violently purple confection impaled upon a skewer. Under the high, condemning frown of his late employer Mr. Noonan exhibited neither contrition nor embarrassment. He descended, offering the hand of cordial good-will.

"I been hoping I'd run into you out here, one these Sat'day afternoons," he said. "I gen'ly stop in to see Gilly and Lollie around this time, but we ain't happened to meet each other, so far."

He hesitated.

"It's turned out first-rate, ain't it? I honestly done my best to keep it from happening, the same as you done yours, but every time I come out here I feel gladder that we both fell down on the job. I guess you ain't so sorry, either, are you?"

Plimsoll shook his head, smiling. He rose easily above an impulse to enlighten the man's natural misapprehension. It would hardly be dignified to explain to an ex-employee the inner, intimate refinements of the delicate strategy in which he had been a humble but useful instrument. Let him continue to believe, if he could, that Belden Plimsoll had, for once, fallen down on a job!

"You see a good deal of—my son-in-law, do you?" He had been slightly puzzled by this implication in Noonan's presence, manner and words. "I didn't know that you and he were—uh—friends."

"What else would we be? Ain't a man gen'ly pretty good friends with his best man?"

Plimsoll swallowed. "Yes," he admitted. "I suppose that's so."

"It's so with me and Gilly and you can write it on your cuff," Noonan declared. "I think a whole lot of that kid. I only hope my Eileen'll pick out somebody just like him."

Plimsoll felt a dim displeasure. He had forgotten about Eileen. Somehow he didn't like to be reminded that, in his own crude fashion, Noonan had discovered and was employing the secret principle of efficient fatherhood that underlay Belden Plimsoll's signal

success in that high calling. He had sense of trespass, of plagiarism.

"How are you getting along with your daughter," he inquired. "Still——uh—buddies?"

Noonan lifted and slowly closed his hand.

"Just like that," he said. "Ain't we, Eileen?"

Unmistakably he addressed the freckly infant on the seat. Visibly the child answered to the name. It looked up, slightly relaxed its effort to insert the purple lollipop in a mouth not quite equal to the test.

"Gup," said Eileen.

"Look at that!" Noonan spoke proudly. "Hear her, did you? She knows who's her buddy, don't you, Eileen?"

"Gup," said Eileen.

"Will you listen to that? And her only going on three!"

Plimsoll nodded the nod of impressed admiration that Noonan's tone demanded. He took leave of the two comrades with cordiality. The dim sense of infringement had gone. He discovered that he quite liked Noonan.

He drove home happily. With a pleasant content he recognized Gilbert's car in the graveled circle before the placid graystone manor house. Somehow the car had become a kind of testimonial to Plimsoll's greatness—it was a material version of Uncle Herbie's declaration as to the biggest toad in this puddle.

He was climbing down from the seat when Gilbert and Lollie appeared at the doorway.

His heart swelled. Always, now, Lollie was the Lollie of her photographs, the perfect proof and consequence of perfect planning, perfect system, but of this perfectness of hers her father was always most acutely conscious at just such moments as this one,

the moments when she was in the act of going away. It seemed to require the impending separation, somehow, to complete her perfectness.

She waggled a gay arm at him, called an affectionate hail and farewell. He didn't try to detain her; he didn't want to. Like all lesser blessings, it seemed, a perfect daughter had to take her flight in order to achieve her brightest radiance.

He spoke affectionately to a perfect son-in-law, and made jocular inquiry, according to ritual, as to the state of a stock farm that still lay wholly in the future. Gilbert coughed and grinned.

"Getting along fine," he said. "Got a new pair this morning. Look."

He exhibited, surveying them himself with grave approval, the whipcord breeches that clad his legs.

"Come on, Bassoon," called Lollie. "No, I'll drive. Hop in!"

Chuckling, Plimsoll watched the car till it was hidden by the curving drive. Even Lollie's nickname for Gilbert seemed to have a part in the perfectness of things.

Perfectness was in the bland, fragrant autumn air, in the slant of sun that flung down on barbered turf the long, dappling shadows of the little apple trees, in those little trees themselves. They held his gaze, and, here, suddenly, he found discord.

One of the branches still held an apple, a warm red glow against silver-gray leaves, a thing perfect in itself, and yet, somehow, a flaw, a false note. He frowned at it. He was frowning at it when, with queer suddenness, it fell.

He saw it strike the clipped sod and roll gently down the slope. As he moved to get it he saw its parent branch rising, rising slowly, happily. The false

note was gone. He felt his shoulders lift and straighten a little as if in sympathy with that apple bough that rose until it gained the long slant of late, gentle sun.

The empty robins' nest had lost its hint of sadness. A fat red-breasted bird hopped cockily across the lawn, paused, pounced, tilted its head and blithely ate.

Obscurely an association wove itself in Belden Plimsoll's mind between this jaunty, carefree bird and the harried father of that crowded, noisy, thankless nest; there seemed to be the same connection between the tired, drooping apple bough that had bent low in the shadow under the red fruit, and the light-hearted branch that now drank in the lazy Indian summer sun.

Albertine's round-throated yoo-hoo came to him from the steps. It made him remember, by force of contrast, the fretted, weary sound of Teenie's voice, last spring.

There was some relationship, he felt, between all these things. It hadn't been by accident that the robins' nest had been crowded and quarrelsome just before the fledgelings flew; it wasn't blind coincidence that had dropped the ripened apple from the weary bough; perhaps it hadn't been mere chance, either, that the wide house where love and peace were waiting for him now had been, three months ago, a cheerless place of discord and unrest.

Maybe, after all, robins and apple trees knew something, too, about this father business. Maybe——

Without consciousness of plagiarism, Belden Plimsoll shook his head and spoke aloud for his agreeing ear.

"You can't tell me it all just happens," he said. "No, sir! It's *meant!*"

THE END.

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